

Inventing the Future: Art and Net Ontologies

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<http://artextra.com>
in conversation with
Annet Dekker

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ANNET DEKKER

In the Art and Net Ontologies Workshop (ANOW) you set about imagining how we might avoid erroneous predictions that were made in the past as we think about the future from the position of the present. You quoted Alan Kay who said 'the best way to predict the future is to invent it', but on the other hand, as you note in the ANOW description, some really brilliant people who did invent the future also made some really bad predictions about it. As you point out, for example, in 1932, Albert Einstein did not believe that nuclear energy would ever be obtainable, and in 1943, IBM chairman Thomas Watson foresaw a 'world market for maybe five computers'. How can we become more aware of the process of change and gain a better understanding of its ramifications?

EDWARD SHANKEN

The group discussed the importance of adopting a broad disciplinary perspective in order to gain insight into current developments and their implications for the future. Historically, many developments that ultimately attained great social significance had simultaneous conceptual roots across disciplines. At some point in the writing of intellectual history one of those disciplines gets credit for having the brilliant idea that changed the world. But if one looks more closely, very similar ideas were percolating in multiple fields. I'm not suggesting a positive zeitgeist theory; rather, this is an observation that might be useful for helping to understanding the larger contours of social and cultural shifts.

So, the question becomes, 'How can we look at what's happening today in science, humanities, arts, and see interconnected kernels, parallel percolations, that could be actualized in the future?' It seems to me that if there are deep relationships between ideas surfacing in different fields, then the likelihood of those core concepts manifesting collectively in the future is probably greater than if we identify a key idea in one field and try to extrapolate the future from that.

For example, cybernetics was fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature from its origin. Its underlying concepts: feedback loops, homeostasis, and the idea of control and communication, allowed parallels to be drawn between biology and engineering, animals and machines. Information theory provided a common language – both technical and metaphorical – for various disciplines to communicate with each other. How does that moment of intellectual history map onto what's going on in our time – onto core ideas that are being developed in computer science, philosophy, art, biology, and interdisciplinary research taking place at their myriad intersections? If we can make the sorts of connections that cybernetics made in the 1940s, maybe we can get a deeper sense of how conceptual convergences now occurring across various disciplines will impact cultural and social development in the future.

AD

What role is art, or the artist, playing within this shaping of a future? Does the notion of 'art for art's sake' still play a role?

ES

I think that artists play an important role in developing and cultivating ideas that have a significant impact on culture. It is hard sometimes to identify what it is that artists do and how that affects society. The language of art is not as readily legible as the languages of mathematics or philosophy. It takes an arguably more abstract form of interpretation to comprehend not only the concepts in art and the potency of art as concrete act, but to understand how art impacts the world on many levels.

ANOW discussed this question at length.

There are forms of activist art that focus on an immediate key issue, comment on it, create awareness about it, spur debate, and insert themselves into a public discourse. Hans Haacke's critiques of the institutional structure of museums and patronage offer a good historical example of this sort of theoretical engagement from the late 1960s. By contrast, the Guerilla Art Action Group were involved in a more *Realpolitik* approach to artistic activism at the time, using protest in art contexts as a medium for resistance. Today, Josh On's *They Rule*¹ can be seen as paralleling Haacke's approach. In the tradition of Guerilla Art Action Group, RTMark and the Yes Men currently use tactical media; direct protest, and political satire in a way that has more immediate effects on the social landscape.²

On the other hand there are ways that art affects the unfolding of society and culture that are much more insidious, and less immediately visible. This harks back to John Latham's notion of 'time-base' – the idea that different forms of cultural production affect things in different time frames.³ This idea has recently been reasserted by Stewart Brand and the Long Now Foundation.⁴ Fashion, for example, changes seasonally and affects things on the surface layer. Other layers, like government, or economic systems, are slower to change because they exist at much deeper levels of cultural, social, material organization. While art is often confused with fashion, particularly by the art market, the more profound effects of art are not immediate and take place at deeper structural levels. So art that is not openly political in content could embody very revolutionary concepts that, over time, seep into culture. This typically occurs through some form of popularization, as in the case of Gustav Metzger's theories of autodestructive art⁵ which inspired a young art student named Peter Townshend of The Who to smash electric guitars during concerts in the 1960s. Art historian Kristine Stiles has theorized this transference of ideas from Metzger to Townshend as an example of the process by which the most advanced conceptual developments in visual art are transmitted in insidious ways to become incorporated into

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Kristine Stiles, 'The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Social Project of Event-Structured Art.' Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987.

1
<http://www.theyrule.net/>.

2
<http://rtmark.com/>
<http://theyesmen.org/>.

3
John Latham, *Art After Physics*. London: Hyperion, 1991.

4
<http://www.longnow.org/>.

7
Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine, 1969.

5
<http://radicalart.info/destruction/metzger.html>.

8
Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on Art Today* (New York: Braziller) 1968; 376.

popular culture.⁶ I liken it to the way that a minor distortion in something small – like a pebble in a little snowball – can cause a major reshaping as the form accumulates and grows, transforming a ball into an oblong orb. This principle explains one of the significant ways that art impacts society, so it is important that it is understood; otherwise art can easily be misconstrued as ineffectual and inconsequential, as decorative or illustrative rather than integral and constructive.

Along these lines, ANOW debated the question of the autonomy of art. Although there was no consensus on this issue, we generally agreed that art is always becoming, that it is not fixed and that there is always a tension between autonomy and continuity. I think the romantic notion of 'art for art's sake' is one of the most destructive and unfortunate concepts about art. It is an illusion to imagine that art exists autonomously. Art is inextricably bound up and related to all other forms of cultural production and intercourse – economics, politics, religion, and so on. By attempting to segregate itself in its own private cloister, art dooms itself to inconsequentiality. At the same time, it's important that artists have the autonomy to experiment without many of the constrictions that apply to other forms of cultural production. As a liminal space, in Victor Turner's sense⁷ art can offer a zone for creative research that allows practitioners the freedom to create things that would be unjustifiable or unsafe in other disciplines but that are important to experiment with. This function – of creating virtual models of the future that can be experienced in the present – is one of the vital roles of art, what Jack Burnham (following McLuhan) referred to as a 'psychic dress-rehearsal for the future'.⁸

AD

In your working group the breakdown of disciplinary boundaries also became an important strategy to overcome the art for art's sake dogma. You spoke about the more pervasive and complicated breakdown of disciplinary boundaries. In this regard, you stated, 'The phrase "everyone as artist" could be formed into "no one an artist", and art ceases to be a meaningful category. What we are left with is

trying to figure out what the problems are and how to solve them, by any means necessary, as a collective practice, joining whatever skills we have at our disposal and trying to figure out ways of sharing those skills, in a synthetic and hybrid process.' Could you elaborate on this a bit more?

ES

Yes, if we accept that art is not autonomous and agree that it is, like science or industry, a form of cultural inquiry and production, then we must ask ourselves, 'What, if anything, is unique to art? What makes certain problems the domain of science or economics or art?' The sorts of disciplinary-specific practices that have developed in the West, the sorts of methods and techniques for identifying problems, processing information, understanding situations, and positing solutions, all have their strengths and weaknesses. Specialization has resulted in the development of very effective tools for solving problems. But if all you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail and the operational procedure is preordained. So a scientist or an artist might not even be framing an object or field of inquiry in a useful way, much less asking good questions about it. If we just put down these disciplinary hats and developed a common language for discussing our practices, we might conceptualize shared observations in different ways and approach solutions to problems with a broader range of tools. My sense is that transdisciplinary research involving artists and scientists engaged in hybrid practices will generate forms of creativity and innovation that do, as Alan Kay suggests, invent the future.⁹

Regarding my attitude toward Beuys' notion of 'everyone an artist' and my provocation, 'no one an artist', I wanted to challenge the idealistic notion that everyone has a hidden artist inside them waiting to be released. If that were the case, then everyone should also be a scientist. Can you imagine the great quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg saying, 'Everyone a scientist'? The fact is that everyone isn't an artist any more than everyone is a scientist. Sure, humans are innately creative beings and anyone can be a dilettante with watercolors, but anyone who tries to be an artist by vocation realizes very quickly that either they are not

sufficiently talented and/or that being an artist is not all that it's cracked up to be – that the mundane reality and economic challenges of being an artist are far from the romantic, imaginary conception of unbridled, individual creative expression. So there is a blurriness about what it is to be an artist and a misconception that everyone is or could be one. The wall separating artists from non-artists seems to be more permeable than that between physicists and non-physicists. This differential blurriness offers both fluidity and tension. On one hand there is much greater permeability across previously constituted boundaries. On the other hand, other boundaries are cropping up, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

One of the key concepts that emerged from the working group was the relationship between friction and non-friction, or lubricity. Friction can be both creative as well as destructive, and lubricity can also be both creative but also destructive. There must be balance between them. This is not new wisdom but is central to Taoist thought. As the I Ching notes: 'Unlimited possibilities are not suited to man; if they existed, his life would only dissolve in the boundless. To become strong, a man's life needs the limitations ordained by duty and voluntarily accepted. The individual attains significance as a free spirit only by surrounding himself with these limitations and by determining for himself what his duty is.'¹⁰

AD

Can you name a current example?

ES

An example of this balance between friction and lubricity, between limitations and boundlessness in digital art is the controversy in February 2009 over Wikipedia Art.¹¹ The artists proposed a work of art, the nature of which demands that it be hosted on Wikipedia. This creates friction. Because that context, which is the only context the work can coherently exist in, is hostile to anything that is not verifiable by Wikipedia standards (essentially a reference in a peer review publication). As there were, at the time, no peer review publications that asserted the authenticity of Wikipedia Art as a *bona fide* art project, the editors deleted the entry.

Wikipedia itself is an excellent example of a walled garden. It has very strict rules, and there are good things about those rules and there are bad things about those rules. Wikipedia's rules are meant to ensure that the information in the online encyclopedia is accurate. But those rules also prevent the publication of some potentially valuable information. The Wikipedians accept that trade off because in a larger ecology of scholarly information, Wikipedia is struggling for recognition and acceptance as a respectable, *bona fide* encyclopedia and must uphold certain standards in order to attain that status.

Wikipedia Art was not censored by Wikipedia. Indeed, the artists provoked the Wikipedians, who responded in a way that was coherent with their rules. Nonetheless, the clash of two incompatible systems – Wikipedia Art and Wikipedia – generated a great deal of tension, demonstrating the limits of each and resulting in fascinating caricatures of artists trying to break rules and encyclopedists insisting on observing them. The theatricality of the interaction was as remarkable as it was predictable.

This clash illustrates the process of negotiation between diverging value-sets that occurs during the shuffling and reconfiguration of boundaries and walls.¹² This is an ongoing process: things build and build and build on themselves such that highly disputed concepts can become so naturalized that it may become difficult to imagine what it might have been like to envision the world from the perspective that challenged them. For example, in the twenty-first century, it is difficult for the untrained eye to grasp what was so radical about Impressionist painting in the mid-nineteenth century. Although Wikipedia Art mounted an intense attack on the inherent values of Wikipedia, it has not succeeded in changing them. If Wikipedia Art ultimately succeeds in posting an enduring entry in Wikipedia, it will be interesting to see to what extent that page strictly follows the rules and to what extent it alters the encyclopedia's inherent value system. But perhaps what is most interesting about Wikipedia Art is that,

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For more on the ideological construction of boundaries, see Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

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See my, 'Artists in Industry and the Academy: Collaborative Research, Interdisciplinary Scholarship, and the Creation and Interpretation of Hybrid Forms,' *Leonardo* 38:5 (2005): 415-18.

10

The I Ching or Book of Changes, Richard Wilhelm, trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. p. 232.

11

<http://wikipediaart.org/>.

at the moment, it inhabits an in-between space. It exists virtually. Although there is no Wikipedia Art page in Wikipedia proper, documentation about the debate between the artists and the Wikipedians currently exists as part of the Wikipedia archive.¹³ This form of quasi-existence demarcates a somewhat paradoxical ontological state, a condition of virtuality that seems to be an increasingly prevalent or explicit characteristic of contemporary being. The forms of creativity, communication, and productivity that emerge under these conditions may offer useful insights into the future.

With regard to the previous question of frictions and lubricities, it is important to note that this is not necessarily connected to the digital. Digital technology has enabled ideas to develop in a certain way that were already emerging in existing practices. It constrains their development in certain ways, and it enables the potential for them to develop in certain ways. In the essay, 'Deleuze and the Genesis of Form', Manuel DeLanda uses the wonderful figure of a soap bubble to illustrate this. The bubble isn't the essential form of soap. Soap can take on many forms: it can be liquid, it can be powder, it can be solid, and it can also be a bubble. It attains that form due to the internal organization of its molecular structure in connection with certain environmental conditions – under the right level of pressure, internally and externally.¹⁴ It is useful to think of technology along similar lines: that it is simultaneously a constraint and a force that, along with many other constraints and forces, affect the actualization of society at multiple levels.

The same can be said about the relation between digital walled gardens and the Internet. Their actualization is shaped by the historical baggage that is both a constraint of any present as well as a momentum that enables that present to become something that the past was not. Following DeLanda's metaphor, this ideological, technical, cultural, social, disciplinary baggage might be inclined to actualize a solid form; the momentum pushes in that direction and it may be difficult

for the virtual material to take a form other than that under those circumstances. But nothing is fixed. Values are always changing, and new technologies, concepts, practices are emerging that enable the virtual material to take on another sort of form or phase-state of being – to become, for example, a bubble. Digital media plays that kind of role, it's part of a whole ecology of constraints and forces, frictions and lubricities, moving from the past into the future through the present.

AD

In your workshop it was stated that, 'Design could be about designing for social friction, but there is also a need to think about the next steps, as friction and disobedience alone might prove unproductive'; How can artists make relevant contributions to envisioning and constructing the future? What are the next steps?

ES

Whereas in the past, boundaries were strictly drawn along lines of nation-states, which were both political and economic as well as social and cultural, now we see tremendous hybridization and interdependency. This is visible in the globalization of economic markets, in various fields of research, where international teams collaborate together, and in the growth of interdisciplinary research where teams come together from various fields. It is visible as well in social exchanges where people increasingly interact over distances that implicitly transcend national and geographic boundaries, and form communities on the basis of affinities of interest rather than local proximity. It will be interesting to look for parallels between these groups: What are the frictions and lubricities that drove or enabled them to flow beyond previous boundaries? What new frictions and lubricities emerged and how were they dealt with? How are they independently yet simultaneously, and perhaps in similar ways, expanding the limits of social organization, exerting pressures and opening spaces that alter the shape or phase-state of culture?

Paul Virilio's notion of the 'integral accident' was an important concept in the ANOW group's discussion. Virilio's critique of globalization and the mediatization of western

13
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Articles_for_deletion/Wikipedia_Art.

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Virilio, Paul, *The Original Accident*. Trans. Julie Rose. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007): p. 38.

16
Jack Burnham. *The Structure of Art*. New York: George Braziller, 1971.

14
DeLanda, Manuel, 'Deleuze and the Genesis of Form', *Art Orbit* 1: 1 (Mar 1998) http://artnode.se/artorbit/issue1/f_deleuze/f_deleuze_delanda.html.

technoculture suggests that as we lose the knowledge and wisdom that attends direct, immediate experience, catastrophic futures are already and unavoidably foreclosed.¹⁵ If we can reveal the mythic structures that order our present and generate the inevitably violent future accidents of which Virilio forewarned, then perhaps we can chart a more peaceful path or at least step into the future more gingerly and with greater perspicacity. The history of western art was interpreted by Jack Burnham as a progressive revelation of the mythic structures that order the very notion of art in the west.¹⁶ Artists reveal not only the mythic structures of art but also reveal the larger mythic structure of western epistemology, of which art is a subset. This role of art may provide an important function vis-à-vis the integral accident.

Along these lines, I'm asking myself what can be learned from the friction between the artists behind Wikipedia Art and the editors of Wikipedia, which generated a debate of great passion, intensity, and anger over what was essentially an epistemological question. Was the Wikipedia Art debate an integral accident waiting to happen? Why did the actors in this drama get so upset when it seemed clear that they were playing very conventional roles and predictably yanking each other's chains? How could they have communicated their differences of opinion in a more mutually respectful way? Could such frictions in the liminal space of art serve as a psychic dress rehearsal for more peaceful and constructive forms of debate and production?

Such questions are related to a key points that emerged from the ANOW discussion. As is typical in a diverse group of individuals, there were obvious frictions between members who had difficulty communicating with each other using a shared vocabulary and who held very different values and belief systems. Collectively, we agreed that it was of utmost importance to acknowledge and respect another's point of view - not just to pay lip service to it, but to really inhabit it. This concept is easier said than done. In order to explore this maxim, we performed an exercise during which each

person took on the persona of another person in the group and interacted with the others as though they were this person. Everyone quickly realized that it is extremely difficult to inhabit the persona of someone else consistently. But the exercise also generated insight into the coherency of another's worldview. That worldview may be completely different than one's own, and feel very unnatural to try to perform, but by playing it out, one gains a better sense of the logic of what it is like to be that person. In doing so, one gains a greater sensitivity to other's values and beliefs. Earlier I suggested that the virtual existence of Wikipedia Art might offer a potentially useful ontological frame for considering alternative forms of presence and being. Perhaps digital virtuality can be a sandbox in which people can play and experiment with identity, knock down conventional boundaries, and forge alternative forms of being and relationship. Only by attaining greater sensitivity and tolerance and by developing platforms for collective communication can the fences of digital walled gardens be scaled and can artists involved in boundary-crossing, hybrid, transdisciplinary research achieve their potential for creatively inventing the future.

‘Develop techniques beyond registering/describing/reporting for making felt the intensity of the taking-form of an event.’



‘Make collaboration the process, not the result of the process.’

Relational Intervals
International Working Conference
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‘To intervene at the threshold means working at the threshold, inviting a collaborative process that erupts as an emergent event.’

‘Activate the collective tissue of the event as well as its outcomes.’



Relational Intervals
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‘Walls can be good! It depends on where they are.’



FLWR PWR
International Working Conference
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‘Challenge traditional notions of HCI (Human Computer Interaction) and usability research in order to create a sociology of net work and net leisure.’

‘If my garden is open how can I be the gardener to maintain parallel identities and who is the scarecrow?’

I want to have a say in what’s going on in my garden.



**Social and Semantic Serendipity
International Working Conference**
20 & 21 November 2008
Lloyd Hotel, Amsterdam

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