

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES

by Robbin Murphy

TOPIC #9: (RE)MEMBERING PORT



"In the course of engagement a mind is created. Apart from that, every kind of excellence can be copied."

--Harold Rosenberg, "The Anxious Object" (1964)

The last day of PORT:Navigating Digital Culture at the MIT List Visual Arts Center was set aside for a discussion about the previous two months by the organizers (of which I was one) and some of the participants and volunteers. Rather than a formal panel it was decided an informal "circle" best represented the spirit of engagement and circulation the exhibition encouraged.

(A transcript of this roundtable is available on the PORT Web site).

Everyone in the discussion agreed that PORT was an "historic" event though as the discussion developed over three hours it became clear that each speaker had constructed their own personal history of what happened. Since most of the projects were time-specific and exist now only as documentation these discrete memories are what remain for the most part. The dismantled gallery installation may be remembered -- and even reconstructed -- but PORT itself requires to be continually re-membered if it is to exist. That is, all the disparate elements that connected to make PORT happen have to be able to connect again in the future.

We intend to travel PORT to other venues in the future. While museum exhibitions are often reconfigured when they travel in order to adapt to specific locations PORT must be reinvented in each manifestation, hence the importance of the wide-area network we've created. What we offer in lieu of physical objects is something like what writer Hakim Bey calls the ability to "maximize the potential for emergence." In more simple terms what we have is the experience and expertise available that is required to make PORT emerge. In even more simple terms, we know how to throw an excellent party.

It's been pointed out that in order to access the projects on-line a viewer needs a computer, preferably one with lots of power, as well as the time to commit to learning how to use new technologies. Some call this techno-elitism and I have to agree. Yet compare this situation to that of projects done even ten years ago using satellites for global tele-conferencing. What once took elaborate preparation and resources for one-time events can be accomplished every night by millions from their home. With the recent purchase of WebTV by Microsoft I see this availability accelerating.

In regards to the commitment of time I think that's a positive thing and we offer any technical advice that we can. The view from the mountain top is often enhanced by the journey and the companionship of others. Instead of isolation and alienation technology can promote community and networking.

Most of the technology we used in PORT is reasonably available and not prohibitably expensive. If it isn't free on-line (as much of the software is) then it can be borrowed or rented. This cannot be said of other forms of technology-dependent art work, especially those offering interactivity or virtual reality. The money normally used for the shipping, insurance and other art object necessities can go to the artists.

The participants themselves have access to a variety of levels of technological sophistication: from a single laptop using Internet Relay Chat to the professional broadcast studios of Pseudo Online Network and el

Net. Most fall somewhere in between and few, if any, had the kind of institutional or corporate support that is required for highly visible projects like the recent Brain Opera from MIT.

There were around twenty-five projects presented for PORT though that number is hard to fix since many of the projects started to interweave with each other during the course of the exhibit. Following are my observations about some of them. For complete project descriptions and profiles see the PORT Web site.

The PORT-MIT listserv started three months prior to the opening, along with the Web site, and ended shortly after the close. What remains is an archive of the daily posts that is one history of the project. On the Web site an informal journal and documentation of the planning process provide another. We are in the process of creating a printed document out of these that will run to some 1,000 pages.

The Web site will remain indefinitely and we are hoping that it can also be preserved off-line as well. It was, and is, as much a "site" of the exhibition as the List Center gallery, if not more so now since the gallery installation is gone. You'll find our original proposal, a time line, participant and project profiles and screen shots automatically taken during scheduled performances in the gallery space.

telerobotic camera On-line viewers requested shots of the gallery space but the dark lighting conditions made photography difficult. A solution from Benjamin and William Tremblay was an infrared-sensitive telerobotic camera they suspended in the center of the screens, enabling on-line viewers to control the direction through a control function on a Web page. Once installed the importance of even this somewhat awkward device became evident and we plan to also include the ability to eavesdrop in future events.

Electronic surveillance is both a modern attraction and a problem, depending on who is watching whom. Privacy is difficult to maintain in public spaces -- that's why they're public. We don't like knowing we've been caught unprepared as we perform on the stage of routine daily life. John Hopkins allowed public access to what were essentially private conversations in his Eight Dialogues. Each week he invited someone to join him on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) to hold a conversation. Others could watch as the writing scrolled down the screen but they could not participate since the IRC software allowed Hopkins to control access.

One irony of the Internet is that people who would never speak in public do so regularly in chat rooms, listservs and MOOs -- either as themselves or as invented on-line characters -- where others can read what they write. This sense of being private in public appears in many of the PORT projects. Raku Writing, took this in another direction by introducing the ability to interfere with another person's narrative, which was then subjected to the influence of a "stressing process" that produced unexpected results.

To others a public is the whole point of the Internet. G.H. Hovagimyan's Art Dirt Im-Port extended the familiar talk show format into two-way interactive performance in what he calls a "communications hybrid." His project grew out of his weekly "Art Dirt" RealAudio program (where I'm one of his co-hosts) with the addition of CU-SeeMe teleconferencing as well as telephone call-ins and text chat. The result was a collage of media forms that sometimes related to each other in their content and often didn't. While confusing at first it soon became the kind of rich media environment that traditional broadcast media isn't.

This format also allowed guests to develop a project within a project, like the Rabinal Achi / ZapatistaPortAction produced by Ricardo Dominguez and **Ron Rocco**. That project also took advantage of the PORT-MIT listserv to post weekly reports on the Zapatista movement in Mexico, which were then interwoven into a performance of the "Rabinal Achi", the Mayan equivalent of the Greek "Illiad".

The intermingling of fiction with fact inspired Adrienne Wortzel's Starboard project, where she provided a realtime performing space, a writing space, an acting-out and re-acting space as well as a place for avatars to interact. The results, combined with a tele-robotic "Ship's Detective" that roamed the studio taking pictures, were recombined weekly into a hypermedia narrative on the nature of life and art where motif took precedence over linearity.

Floating Point Unit's emergent(c) room and Prema Murthy's rDNA (imagined) used CU-SeeMe video conferencing and text chat to create circulating structures that responded to outside influences. Murthy's project was particularly effective in taking the stream-of-consciousness text chat, running it through the Mac text-to-speech then streaming it over RealAudio to create not only an image but an environment in the gallery that closely resembled the structure of DNA .

Perceptual boundaries and the possible transcendence of those boundaries were explored by Cary Peppermint in his Conductor #1: Getting in Touch with Chicken. Placed in a box Peppermint attempted to attain the energy required to communicate with a live chicken in another box 10 meters away. The futility of this exercise and the seriousness with which he approached it created an unusually supportive environment where visitors both on-line and in the gallery eagerly entered into his absurd world to help him attain his goal.

Creation of community was also the basis of CyberDance Myths by Carmin Karasic (who was also a technical volunteer for PORT) and Leslie Everett. While working in the gallery Karasic noticed a need to provide visitors with familiar reference points in cyberspace. The sounds of chanting and computer beeps accompanied collaborative collaging of mythological symbols and a text chat on modern mythologies, creating a new hybrid mythology drawing from all corners of the earth and our collective histories.

Audio proved to be far more effective than we'd originally thought it could be thanks to the improvement of RealAudio technology and the availability of a state-of-the-art digital sound system in the gallery. Helen Thorington's turbulence project involved a live audio mix of voice, instruments, tapes and live audio feeds from remote locations that was remixed and added to each successive week. The result was an immersive and turbulent aural environment in the gallery that was also accessible on-line.

The most popular project for visitors to the gallery was Mapdance by Marek Walczak and partners. Each Sunday an interactive on-line dance was held in a 3-D VRML world using Black Sun Interactive's "Cyberhub" environment. Rather than recreating the real world on-line "Mapdance" created virtual 3-D worlds out of the Internet using software that would automatically turn Web pages into avatars. The results were decidedly nonhuman in appearance but often bore a striking resemblance to the original source, and allowed participants to represent themselves by more than physical appearance. The fact that VRML allows worlds to interact and not just individuals, is something the commercial developers have yet to learn. Walczak and his team have shown them some of the possibilities enabled by their own creations.

There were many more PORT projects that explored the possibilities of engagement on-line including touch by ParkBench, Mr. Z by MythMachine, Homeport by Lawrence Weiner, Soundings by Jesse Gilbert, Prosthesis to a Well by Sawad Brooks, an untitled project by ellipsis and all the participants from around the world in the closing Web Jam. Project descriptions and screen shots may be found for all of them on-line on the PORT Web site and, we hope to work with them again as members of future manifestations of PORT.

If there was a guiding spirit to PORT that would have to be Ebon Fisher. Simultaneously irritating and charming he acted as a friendly "outside agitator" throughout the development process and the exhibition itself. His Alula Dimension appeared during the opening then again at the Web Jam closing.

We conceived of PORT as a way to present "the flux of digital culture". Thanks to the dedication and support of the participants, volunteers and interns we succeeded in creating, if not a definitive picture, at least a glimpse of the possibilities in engaging in that flux.

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<http://home.ease.lsoft.com/Archives/port-mit.html>