

Lecture 1 – class notes

A fundamental aspect of Web art is the possibility to utilize the computer's capabilities (intended as a hardware/software ensemble). These capabilities are intended as optimal opportunities because the medium limitations also limit the range of action, and therefore they do not place hardware and software on the same level as other tools to make art with.

Once this concept has been established, one must think the Web as a constant suggestion; and since the Web infinitely accepts any work, it is clear that the Web itself becomes an interactive and suggestive support.

In other words, the Web is not a fixed support. For instance, it may change according to the search engine managers' priorities (this change is, in practice, a change in display order and is influenced by various interventions towards highlighting the newest site, or the same site which enters the search engine with multiple description keywords).

Then, there is change due to browser management (Netscape, Explorer, Opera, etc.), which, without appropriate adjustments (but also with, and despite them), will provide different page position and colors. In this respect, even the viewer's monitor plays a remarkable role.

First of all, however, comes the interaction between the artist and the software and hardware he/she has to work with. For instance, telling a group of people to make a drawing with a 4B pencil on a sheet of Fabriano mat A3 paper is assigning more precise instruments than telling the same group of people to draw a few lines on a digital board and then insert those lines in the Web. In this instance, it will be difficult to find color homogeneity, even though the hues were assigned previously. This is because Web visualization depends on an infinite number of factors, besides those strictly related to vision.

It will be appropriate to define now what Web art means. As a premise, I will say that video art and more specifically conceptual art should have somehow cleared the ground for a different concept of art.

For Kosuth, for instance, the work of art is a sort of residue, of left-over of the artistic thought or project. Therefore the work of art, according to his concept, is not the primary driving force of artistic thought, but the effect of artistic assimilation, and consequently, I am tempted to say, an undigested left-over, or that which is not assimilated because it is preordained by a natural organ devoted to this function. As one can see, the work of art becomes less and less material and more and more entrusted to a necessity which is not exactly physical.

On the other hand, video art wanted, since its own inception, to give a disturbance to those which, according to our vision, were human images, events, comments and all that television offered since its dawn. Disturbances and interference directed to put in a difficult position an only apparent homogeneity (as later McLuhan's and DeKerchove's investigations pointed out). Not only that, but video art also reproduces certain optical effects of which we are not aware such as, for instance, the continuous need to focus or blink which, in artists like Nam June Paik are translated into syncopated frames of very high frequency and devoid of possibility of eye memory (the installations of this artist can be viewed at the Köln museum of modern art). I will only add that the rejection of video as a source of homogenization of culture had other fathers, such as Vostell, but that the most active evolution was caused by those who separated, with time, the TV box from its images. A further example is Nam June Paik's Buddha, who is watching a candle-TV, and basically is observing himself.

Conceptual and video art, including video installations, gave a push towards the non-physical "representation" of the work of art. It is also clear that there are different schools of thought: those who see art in the work itself, those who see it in the content, those, like Kosuth, who see it in the residue, and therefore in the inability to have a real transfer of artistic thought. What is certain is that the work of art became dematerialized and turned into "presentation", that is to say a message of itself without including matter as a support. It is also evident that the rejection of the art system was conducive to second thoughts and compromises. Art (and I mean video art) has taken a few leaps backwards to

recapture some works it had lost on the way. Because of market considerations, it offered again those embellishments from which it had liberated itself. But this did not last for long (although is still going on sometimes). As a curiosity, the equation remains that videos, in the art market, have a decidedly lower value than any other work of art, and this independently from any value that art works may have. Some of the most popular excuses are that a video can be copied, and therefore is not “unique”, or else that a video gets damaged much more easily than a bronze statue. Or even that videos belong to the movie category, are poor cousins of the seventh art, and do not have the charisma of artistic tradition. All this, naturally, is not part of all the art world, but it is part of a world which has a decisive weight on art. As a precaution I will say that large Web and CD projects are being bought by museums which are at the cutting edge for choice of their collections. The price paid is still low, but it is, however, a way to enter the ranks of the chosen.

I will now say what, in my opinion, is Web art.

Web art is, above all, a double interaction. It is the observer/machine interaction, and interaction with all that exists on the Web. Web art is self-making, as I said before. It is a self-regeneration which cannot count on a possible end of the work of art. In order to explain my thoughts better, I will try to examine what the Web offers in the so-called field of art, and comment on it each time.

The first artists to utilize the Web performed a kind of museum cataloguing. Others decided to use the Web as a place of debate, probably expecting a revelation, an epiphany that should have arisen from those debates. We can clearly see how many artists who used the Web as a museum are still doing that, by supplying images of their work, a contact address for the artist (and to purchase the works). I must say that there has been a certain confusion on the Web (I am talking about the beginning of its use). There was a misinterpretation that made one think (not always wrongly) that the Web was just a substitute for other media, and therefore usable instead of the most important media as an electronic bulletin board. In fact, at its inception, the Web worked as a huge newspaper, waiting for future hardware and software discoveries. Everybody was exalting the miracles (and also the sins) that such a thing would have brought about, and while

waiting everybody was adjusting their aim, also depending on everyone's ability to access certain machines and certain programs. But what I really want to say is that the long list of works on the Web, the numberless photographs complete with price, medium, and technique are not Web art. They might as well be fine pictures of fine art, but all they have to do with the Web is only a commercial, or container/content relationship. Later on, the basic themes became less trivial, both because of experimentation and because the Web was starting to offer different and more interesting opportunities, and have acquired a certain collective character. In this sense, starting from the first experiments, Web art began to have its own reason for being which set it apart, or rather, characterized it as an artistic environment.