

A report on The International Festival of Multimedia Urban Arts

December 14th - 20th , 2000

Belfort, France

<http://www.interferences.org>

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This multimedia and digital art festival is an ambitious and visionary undertaking organized by the Pierre Schaeffer Center (CICV) of France and funded by the French Ministry of Culture. Over 350 artists from 41 countries descended upon the village of Belfort, France. Here's the tally; 6 theater pieces, 63 installations, 30 performances, 20 cd-rom presentations, 37 internet sites, 70 videos, and 30 animations. Check out the tip top web site to get an idea of the breadth of work presented. The festival compares favorably with other European venues such as Ars Electronica or the Net Condition show put on by the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany. I was lucky enough to be invited to participate in 2 different ways. In the net.art section Mark Tribe of rhizome (<http://www.rhizome.org>) asked me to go in his stead and present rhizomes site and do an off the cuff remix with the artist Mouchette (<http://www.mouchette.org>). I was also there with Peter Sinclair to premiere our new collaborative piece Heartbreak Hotel (<http://artnetweb.com/gh/heartbreak.html>) OK , enough horn tooting.

The festival was partially held in the Novotel in Belfort. An ultra modern hotel/convention center that somewhat resembles the TWA Saarinen terminal in New York. The feeling of the crowds attending the festival reminded me of the Sci-Fi movie Logans Run. Next door to the Novotel is another large loft like building housing a choreography center. I was able to catch a wild theater piece by the US/French troupe , Faim Du Siecle. This involved dancers in primary color body makeup moving in various geometric containers. The effect was of archetypal Bhaghdavaghita characters set in minimal sculpture. The space was enormous. The dancers were being videoed and their images projected on large screens around the walls. The music was de rigeur techno. The best bit was a steam contraption that had video projections of demons floating in the mist. The crowd wandered though the piece and one male dancer in particular took it upon himself to confront the audience with aggressive gesturing and positioning.

On the main floor of the Hotel there were a number of installations and a net.art area. American museums might take a cue from the way in which the net.art was presented here. The CICV's web people designed a minimal browser interface that allowed one to link out to the web but not shut down the browser. A back button floating on the screen always returns the browser to the festivals front page. This solves the problem of people using net.art installations to check their email. The organizers also understood that free email and chat are an intrinsic part of a networked environment and they had a different bank of computers set up for people to check their email and chat. I didn't see all the web pieces but I was able

to catch Nezvana Netochka (<http://www.eusocial.com>) nato.O+55 et nebula.m81 presentation, PAVU.COM (<http://www.pavu.com>) and of course Mouchette (<http://www.mouchette.org>). The New York city net.art crowd were well represented with sites by MTAA (<http://www.mtew.com>), Kevin & Jennifer McCoy (<http://www.radiofrankenstein.net>) Yael Kanarek (<http://www.worldofawe.net>) and Maciej Wisniewski's alt browser Netomat (<http://www.netomat.net>) as well as Jon Ippolito's peripatetic collaborative piece with Janet Cohen, Frank Keith and Joline Blais, Adversarial Collaboration. (<http://www.three.org>). I mention these because they are the ones most familiar to me. Which brings up an interesting point about the net.art phenomena. It turns out that a rather important component of net.art is the web demo remix in which a person presents a site or several sites to a group of other people. The demonstration of an aesthetic seems to heighten the appreciation. This is a sort of low level performance that has the potential to develop in all sorts of directions, stay tuned for further developments when broadband becomes common. My favorite web demo was PAVU.COM. Three representatives from pavu.com, Jean-Phillipe Halgand, Thomas Clemet and Paul Dupouy plus DJ028 did a bilingual rap/demo accompanied to techno. It was a lot of fun and was only sullied by the fact that the previous presenter NATO took twice as long for her/his presentation, which I was perhaps the least interesting web presentation I attended.

Everyone was cheered up by the PAVU.COM crowd who were wearing dayglo fake fur vests and cheap wrap-around shades. Their site is a sort of napster for net art and truly innovative in the best communitarian sense of the internet. They've figured out a sort of virtual money system for art patronage that promises to build into a real alternative system for 21c digital art. Way good. Two thumbs up.

Part of the concept of Interferences was to extend the idea of multimedia arts out into the social fabric of the street and disperse it throughout the town of Belfort. This was done in a number of striking ways. There were many projection pieces thrown on the walls of buildings. These tended to be people talking in confessional tones about relationships. What was interesting was the idea of externalizing private interior conversations in a public space via an audio/video projection. Walking past these various works one was indeed interfered with. One of the more interesting projected confessional pieces was a work by Anne Vauclair called The Secret.

A peculiarly French phenomena is the nomadic studio. This is where artists encapsulate their art in a way that it can be transported via caravan. Folded into this concept is a socialist idea of community art workshops and outreach programs. This was presented by L'Espace Gantier of (Bourogne) among other groups. One manifestation by Atelier Nomades was a totally chopped apart car that had a scaffold structure with video projection screens and loud speakers presenting art works. This mobile art truck drove around town during the evenings and was a real upbeat traffic stopper. A more abstract work was a series of 3d computer generated forms that playfully greeted people entering the exhibition or passing between the main Atria to the parking garages where many of the installation and video pieces were housed.

Installation works using a variety of software and hardware were perhaps the most interesting part of the whole exhibition. Gebhard Sengmuller did his Vinyl

Video display set-up. This is part spoof on trade show installations and a bizarre retro application where he creates vinyl lp records to show video. Two robotic entries were also quite interesting. One from the L.O.E.I.L workshop at the Ecole D'Art D'Aix-en-Provence's chief Christian Soucayet was an inflatable bubble encompassing a mobile robotic projection device. this beautiful object glided across the floor enticing the audiences with its ever changing interior video projections. The audience was able to control the robots movements by dialing a phone number from their mobile phone and directing the robot with keypad movements (co-creators Aurelian Oliva, Larent Costa, Marco Joriot, Jean-Pierre Mandon, Antoine Ballasina). The other from ZKM (Matthias Gomel, Gunther Haffelder, Haitz Martina, Jan Zappe/ convergence homMACH), a pair of industrial robotic arms that moved according to emotion sensors placed on a persons head and jugular vein. Most of the time the robots moved in a fluid ballet except when one subject received a cell phone call during the demonstration. The ensuing heated argument caused the robot arms to convulse and flail about wildly in a comic caricature of mechanical histrionics. Modesty prevents me from talking about my collaborative piece Heartbreak Hotel but you may access documentation and a description on line at; (<http://artnetweb.com/gh/heartbreak.html>).

The grand prize winner for installation art was a piece called Atari Noise by Mexican artist Archangel Constantini. The piece is a 9 square grid of TV monitors displaying what looks like animated stripe paintings with attendant electronic monotones generated by disassembled Atari control panels. Viewers could step up to a podium with a series of buttons and change the rhythm, patterns and tones generated. Constantini assembled this piece by salvaging discarded Atari's. The piece has a sort of William Gibson sci-fi sense of the tinkerer artist.

I must stress that this was such a large exhibition for such a short period of time that it was physically impossible for one person to see all the pieces many of which are time based. That being said I'd like to talk performance. Each night a top techno mixer delighted the young audiences with ambient techno and video mixes in the lobby of the Novotel. Another location for performances was in the fortress tower of the city walls. Perhaps the best performance was that of Russian artist Alexi Shulgin. He also captured first prize in the performance art category for his performance 386DX, (<http://www.easylife.org/386dx>) Alexi came onstage with a computer keyboard hanging from a guitar strap slung around his shoulder. He looked like Joey Ramones of the Ramones punk rock band. A synth voice announced that the human onstage was merely decoration. after starting up the first song Alexi pantomimed various guitar playing gestures using the keyboard as his ersatz axe. A screen behind him pulsed with a cheap geometric light show animation synchronized to the music. This is one of those applications one can download from the internet for free. A sort of kiddie light show. Indeed, the midi sound tracks for each song played are freely available on the web from pop music midi sites. The first song was a droll rendition of California Dreamin' originally done by the Mamas and the Papas. The male synth voice sang along in the stilted comic manner of synthetic voice. The high point of the concert was the synth voice singing the Doors song Light My Fire. Indeed, the whole concert was a string of mostly American rock hits. The European audience cheered and applauded in recognition as each subsequent song began. What this points out is a very sharp analysis of the pervasiveness of American media products throughout the world. At one point the 386dx band launched into the Sex Pistols song, Anarchy in the

UK. This moved a couple of the audiences young fellows to start doing faux moshing and slam dancing and yes I know The Sex Pistols are British.

What I found most intriguing was the subtext of commonality of experience created by rock music. This appears to be an epoch just passing and is currently being replaced by the shared experience of a global internet. Structurally speaking, Alexi a Russian artists refers to American media but filters it through both web accessibility and a European point of view. The only comparable festivals in the US are the yearly Siggraph conference and the Digital Salon hosted by the School of Visual Arts in New York. Siggraph is a mostly pay as you go trade fair for the computer graphics industry and The Digital Salon is an interesting venue that is sorely underfunded (sva covers the costs but thats it).

Interestingly enough, because of the conservative backlash in the US for the past 15 years most if not all of the art presented at Belfort will never be seen in the US. This is a consequence of the American congress cutting off money to the arts or demanding that artists address a specific social issue such as multiculturalism, under representation or local community based art projects. Europeans are quite stymied by the fact that America is viewed as the hi tech wellspring and yet lags behind in venues for presenting digital art. There are of course efforts by SFMoMA and The Walker Arts Center to enlarge the arena for the presentation of experimental digital art which is encouraging. And people in America are watching to see what develops with John Johson's digital art museum Eyebeam Atelier. But so far the Europeans seem to be way out front in the organizing and presenting of new media art.

<http://artnetweb.com/gh>