

École du Magasin - 10ème session - statement

Digital Deviance

The present text constitutes the meeting-point of the work undertaken in the framework of our research, as well as a material manifestation of our thinking process. It seems necessary therefore to describe the context and the specific circumstances in which it was born. We chose to undertake a curatorial project striving to define and question the notion of “cyberculture”. Right from the start, we looked into the work of the collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). Their theoretical writings on electronic media and biotechnologies, their stance as activists/artists and cultural resistances, their work integrating and combining varied modes of expression, seemed to us, particularly pertinent to our field of investigation. We invited Steve Kurtz and Steve Barnes, founder members of CAE, to Grenoble, and worked together during the last week of March 2001. To us, this procedure and pedagogical context are already, in themselves, a curatorial act in that they query the traditional relationships that exist not only between artists and exhibition curators, but also in a wider sense, those that exist between cultural institutions and the public. The result of this collaboration was the production of a statement written in English, of which the present text is both a translation and revised by curatorial team.

About Digital Deviance

If our research was originally developed around the idea of cyberculture, it soon became clear to us that this notion was too generally defined to enable the elaboration of a strategy for an exhibition, especially because of the fact of the current use of the term. Cyberculture is, indeed commonly associated with online informatics and also implies a direct reference to the research in the field of robotics and cybernetics. But our position and our intentions in this project cannot be limited to these specific fields and the use of the term of cyberculture would have a limiting effect on possible outcomes, especially in terms of the media choice. We looked for another topic with which we could express our interests better. This led us to the idea of digitality, a concept theorized by CAE in an article entitled *Recombinant Theatre and Digital Resistance* (1). Although the French equivalent of the English digital is “numérique” we have chosen to translate here the neologism digitality (“digitalité”) elaborated by CAE so as to remain as close as possible to the original terminology. This concept is better defined and seems to better correspond to contemporary practice and to the present-day cultural situation.

Our research into digitality began with the identification of its limits as a model (in the light of how it has been recently represented in the cultural landscape). First, we noticed a discrepancy between its theoretical possibilities and its practical applications in different exhibitions. According to its common meaning, digitality (and by extension, digital) is often defined technologically rather than by its methodological and/or philosophical dimensions. However, digitality is more than a simple characteristic meant to qualify a technical device; rather it describes a way of interpreting the world and acting within it. We also wish to query the idea of a bipolar and Manichaean opposition between the digital and the analogic. Historically, the world has been interpreted through the hegemonic filter of the analogic. Although, over the past two centuries, that is to say, at the epoch of mass reproductibility and

the emergence of the capitalist system of production, the digital model has challenged this domination of the analogic paradigm.

From a strictly technical point of view, the conflict between the two models took shape when, in 1948, Claude Shannon, an electrical engineer from the Bell laboratories, managed to solve the problem of sending a clear signal over a noisy channel. The solution consists in transforming sound into a numerical/digital code which can be emitted through the channel and retransformed into sound at its reception. Digital coding of the signal enables the latter to go through the channel without its structure being disrupted or deteriorated, and its decoding on arrival allows the reception of a clear and intelligible message. In the field of information and communication technology, the analogic model rapidly became less useful. But the influence of the digital has equally extended gradually to the field of cultural production. From the viewpoint of general principles, the difference between the analogic and digital lies in a contrast between the basic postulates: while the analogic claims that order emerges from chaos (and chaos from order), the digital suggests that order comes from order (through encoding). The digital attitude consists therefore in isolating and appropriating an existing order in a specific system, a determined field; and in moving, decontextualizing and applying that order in a different field.

Thus, in the art field, one can oppose, in a didactic manner, two different procedures. On the one hand, an analogic-type procedure which would consist in representing, via the canons of art history and criticism, the quest for an original style which would be unique to the artistic vision of its author, and which would have the object to bring into evidence a singular and unusual perception of order, detached from the chaos of sensations (in this case the work cannot be duplicated, it can only be forged or fall into discrepancy with time). On the other hand, a digital-type procedure would consist of producing a work by mechanical means that guarantee the possibility of an equivalent reproduction (here, the work defies originality since it can be reproduced as long as the constituent products continue to be manufactured).

We do not mean to suggest that the digital and the analogic exist as pure bipolar and opposing forms, but rather they exist on a continuum on which there are many hybrid manifestations. Let us take, for example, the Fordist model of production. From 1904 on, Henry Ford attempted to manufacture digital cars in that all the completed units of production were equivalent to one another, off the assembly line. However, by putting at the buyers' disposal all sorts of kits destined to adapt the basic models to their specific needs or to their individual aesthetic choice, Ford integrated too, analogic characteristics to adapt to demand. The problem with the Fordist model appeared in the process of production itself. Ford, as well as other manufacturers asked their workers to become an extension of the digital machinic apparatus. In other words, the workers, literally were incorporated into the assembly lines where they were transformed from bodies of desire to bodies of instrumentality. In relationship to the principle of efficiency, capitalist economy has insisted that desire may take no object other than those accepted within the parameters of production and consumption. This reductive tendency of capitalist political economy has been a key site of political resistance. The works of Marx and Engels on the textile industries of London in 19th century had already brought to light this alienating mode of capitalist production. This phenomenon of the instrumentalization of workers' bodies appears equally, be it in a caricatural manner, but nevertheless quite explicit, in the *Modern Times* by Charlie Chaplin. Activists, through both analogic and digital means, have attempted to re-establish the liberation of desire by disturbing, disrupting and subverting the structures and codes that homogenize and channel individual desire and collective consensus as far as their definition

and expression is concerned. (2)

We propose to focus our attention for our project on digital means of resistance. We want to envision how and to what extent cultural resistance can appropriate digital characteristics of the system in order to turn them against it.

By definition, deviance is a turning away from a norm, a behaviour beyond the common rules of society. Thus, activism can be considered as a sort of social deviance in that it legitimizes the expressions of desire which are typically labelled “marginal”, “abnormal”, “pathological” or “illegal”. The appropriation of the capitalist tendency toward the digital by activists appears in cultural landscape as deviance in both form and content. As form, digital cultural practice has been reduced to three or four standardized categories: net.art, interactivity, virtual reality and on some occasions, video. Practitioners of resistant digitality either subvert or expand the institutional categories of New Media and thereby tend to be placed in the subject position of deviant in the eyes of cultural institutions. In terms of content, digital deviants engage a pedagogical practice that expands the field of public discourse (3) on issues of representation in macro contestation process.

The connection implied between desiring bodies, resistant digital practice and public discourse will be a central focus of our project in general, and our exhibition in particular.

Against Method

Methodology is the most difficult element to describe in our process. This is because all methods have a unique problematic - those inherent causalities which predetermine the result of any given exploration.

So, we wish, as far as possible, to minimize our methodological restrictions. Of course, we cannot reject a priori all system of organization but we mean to adopt principles that are as open-ended as possible. Such a notion implies a Dadaïstic position that can integrate contradiction as a necessary component of experimentation. (4) Our aim is to make evident the strategies and modes of enunciation rather than forms, we wish to present a series of manifestations, some contradictory, of the digital model, the possibilities of interpretation in order to maximize. These cultural digital methods based on ordered reproduction are defined in terms such as: appropriation, plagiarism, montage, sampling, recombination, détournement, readymades, clones... These typologies can materialize in any medium. Technology is not what associates a cultural practitioner with digitality; rather, it is the philosophical interpretation and methodology.

Moreover, it seems important to stress that we are interested in a specific network, an artistic scene already constituted and active, but at the moment, or not very visible in France, especially within its cultural institutions. The artists/activists whose work we present are in contact with each other, they have often worked together on common projects, and they share, of course, similar interests and methods. So, it is a question of appropriating an existing order, then to create from that, a new order, reconfiguring this network, by introducing new elements presented in a new context. That is to say by making them accessible to the French public through an exhibition held in an established cultural institution.

The second problematic within our process arises from our position relative to the art centre

in which we work as subjects following a curatorial training program. Like our theoretical model and like ourselves as subjects, our methodological process is in a state of becoming. Rather than a finished product, our goal in the exhibition is to propose a representation of our procedure of analysis of digital cultural principles and practices, at a particular point in time.

A Brief Discussion of the Institutional Approach

After reviewing the literature on past exhibitions which have dealt with issues in digitality, cyberculture, and/or activism, what became clear was what we wanted to avoid in terms of exhibition strategies considered inapplicable to our project. In the 1990s, the assimilation of the digital New Media, its association into particular technical apparatus with, as well as the division of the genre into a limited set of fixed, homogenized categories contributed to defining a global problematic inspiring the majority of exhibition strategies (*Mythos Information* at Ars Electronica, ZKM's *Net Condition*). The shows did little to energize discourse on the philosophical implications of digitality, nor did they provide a contrast of possibilities that could act as a catalyst for a more enriching public conversation. Moreover, the permanent collections of these institutions, those of ZKM notably, are also concerned by this problem: the interactive vision engines that such institutions tend to collect generally become technological dinosaurs after a few years due to the rapid changes in technology regarding both hardware and software. Our approach would be closer to that of the Künstlerhaus in Stuttgart curated by Fareed Armaly whom we also invited as consultant to our project. This institution, although devoted to the study of the media over the last 20 years does not present a simple showcase of technical possibilities linked to the digital: it reserves a large place for traditional media, notably printed work and envisages digitality in terms of methodological possibilities rather than technical ones.

The history of the relationships between art and activism being a long and complex one has led us to attempt to search through volumes of information looking for exhibition strategies that could answer our specific needs. With the introduction of digitality in all its forms into activist discourse, the field of possibility has radically expanded. We thought that we had to address issues such as high velocity online communication, online/offline relationships, networking possibilities, and electronic tactics. We had to frame all this by the more general issue of globalization, which has in turn, radically expanded the space and scope of activism. To a degree, these new fields have not been adequately theorized, nor have enough practices been tested over time; however, we believed that we could work by analogy with certain exhibition strategies of the past. Two key exhibitions that influenced our considerations on how to proceed were *Group Material's Democracy Project* and The World Information Organization's *Future Heritage project*. Both used digital methodologies in terms of replicating systems of culture for subversive purpose; yet they were still successful at opening their initiatives to all varieties of media produced from different subject positions.

The older of the two exhibitions, the *Democracy Project* (1988/89 presented at the DIA Art Foundation in 1990) was useful to us in two ways. First, diverse public spheres from a large spectrum of specific roles (consisting of professional and amateur artists, students, activists, art critics...) represented multivariant cultural identities and contributions. Secondly, the exhibition was open to any medium. Although electronic digital media in a technical sense was absent from the exhibition, it was present in a conceptual sense. From this model, as well as the discussions that we had about this with Julie Ault we began to understand how we could use digital forms for our own purposes.

The web site of Future Heritage (<http://www.world-information.org>) exhibition presented for the first time in *Brussels 2000*, gave us a more contemporary use of contrast and difference as a means of articulating and representing marginal resistant discourse. This exhibition combined machinical coding technology, analogic systems, mundane technical interventions, state of the art informatics and bioinformatics, and volumes of 2-D graphics to create a representation of invisible activities that have an impact on everyday life. This strategy had the effect of freeing us from a tendency towards the most current research as well as reinforcing our idea that digital machines did not have to dominate the exhibition.

Rather than presenting a collection of visual apparatus that only contribute to the progress in technical research, our aim in this exhibition is to show an ensemble of diverse works which could contribute to a pondered discussion on the conceptual possibilities of digital cultural practice.

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Notes

(1) Critical Art Ensemble. "Recombinant Theatre and Digital Resistance", in *The Drama Revue*, MIT press, Winter 2000.

(2) Félix Guattari, *Soft Subversions and Chaosophy* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996). We would also like to take this opportunity to state that we are in agreement with Guattari's position on desire. Desire is all that exists in a human being before the introduction of language. Desire is an open field that has an infinitude of possible trajectories, and is always in a state of becoming. While desire cannot be inscribed by semiotic codes, it can be channelled by them by reducing this open-ended schizophrenic field to a constricted, rationalized flow suitable only for the machinic flows accepted by the dominant political economy. Disturbing these boundaries is a primary goal of digital activism.

(3) "Public discourse", this expression has to be understood here in the sense given to it by *Group Material* in the *Democracy Project*: this sense implies a proximity de facto between the public and the presented works (and even sometimes an active and direct participation in their production), and therefore a real interactivity - not a fake one as it is the case in most so-called interactive exhibitions.

(4) "A Dadaïst remains completely cold in front of any serious enterprise, he feels there's something in the wind from the minute one stops smiling to adopt an attitude and a facial expression announcing that something important is going to be said. A Dadaïst is convinced that a life which deserves to be lived will be possible only if we start by never taking anything seriously, and if we remove from our language the profound but already decayed senses accumulated over centuries ('looking for the truth'; 'defending Justice'; 'being passionately interested in'; etc). A Dadaïst is ready to promote joyful experiences even in the fields where change and experience seem to be excluded (for example: fundamental functions of language)." Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso).