review

conference/exhibition

Talking about Art.ficial emotions:
A report from São Paulo, Brazil
By Camille A. Silva

Emoção Art.ficial - Technological Divergences 2.0 is the second edition of an international exhibition and symposium held by Itaú Cultural in São Paulo, Brazil, this year. The first event took place in 2003. Curated by Arlindo Machado and Gilbertto Prado, the exhibition displayed thirty works by artists from several countries where the political use of technology is impacting society. The importance of this event in Brazil reflects upon the geographical displacement and social differences of a country where the benefits of technology are discriminatory and restricted to a privileged group. Curators Machado and Prado intended to stimulate independent thoughts and experiments that criticize the hegemonic technological discourse of marketing and consumption.

Altogether, the exhibition, which ran from July 2 - September 19, 2004, at Centro Itaú Cultural in São Paulo, presented artworks as mainstream forces against globalized technocracies. Excerpts may still be viewed at http://www.itaucultural.org.br/emocaoart-ficial2. The symposium, on the other hand, embraced questions of new media art perspectives, such as: the inclusiveness of digital media, collaboration, intervention, immersion, and emerging realities. It took place from July 2 - 5, 2004, and registration was also free of charge, although the number of participants was limited. I am a graduate student in the United States, but my home is in Brazil, where I was spending the summer. Hearing about the conference a bit late, I was accepted only for the last day of round tables. However, with a little patience and persistence, I made my way into every talk, taking the places of those who had not confirmed their registrations. It was pretty intense but rewarding, and the symposium is the main focus of my report.

The first night was exciting: nothing substantial was said; just enough to make us all wonder about what was to come. The opening ceremony honoring poet Haroldo Campos and artist Júlio Plaza made reference to the pioneering works in Brazilian media art. After that, Jeffrey Shaw, advisor of the event and keynote speaker, introduced the themes of the round table discussions. International mutuality, national identity, and operational ambience were pointed out as ways to deeply engage the viewers of new media artworks. It was interesting, but vague, so I looked forward to the upcoming discussions.

The following three days of the symposium brought what were, to me, some of the most amazing artists and theorists of new media art together to discuss contemporary issues concerning the use of technology in the world today. Each speaker had approximately 20 minutes of presentation before questions were opened to the public. Discussions were almost always heated as the round tables gathered a diversity of topics. Nevertheless, out of 44 speakers, the presentations of Coco Fusco, Cláudia Giannetti, Mariela Yeregui, Sara Diamond, Arlindo Machado, Eduardo Kac, and Roy Ascott seemed to rise to the top.

Coco Fusco, writer, performance artist, and professor at Columbia University, and Mariela Yeregui, director, film editor and professor at the University of Buenos Aires, raised the most critical and political questions for discussion. Fusco, part of the round table focusing on "Art and Technology: How to Politicize the Debate?," talked about technology as an instrument of power. She added that computer art and digital media are precedents of a sort of space of promotion, where there is a big influx of money, especially in Western countries such as the U.S. According to her, this reality ends up enforcing political and industrial expressions in art. The same perspective informed Fusco's work in the exhibition, a performance video entitled "Dolores from 10 to 10," which involved the discourse of the digital revolution as a social expression capable of freeing women. Mariela Yeregui, on the other hand, was not as political, but definitely critical. Within the discussion entitled "Network Subjectivity," her remarks pointed out that virtual spaces are meant for the construction of discourse and identity -- spaces where these are not a given, but actually emerge in the exchange of subjectivities in communication. Art, collaboration, and interaction are the elements of communication that help to homogenize discourse, making the virtual and real worlds more compatible. The piece "Inordinate topographies" is an example of interactive surroundings bringing forward this compatibility between worlds. It is a Web project, a work in progress, that aims to construct cartographical representation of spaces, created and imagined by users.

Cláudia Giannetti, Sara Diamond, and Arlindo Machado focused on aspects that have emerged

from the new perspectives found in media art. Collaboration was the element most discussed among all of them, even though they were also leading different tables. It reminded me of Geert Lovink's statement that the whole collaborative concern in art depends upon the idea of shared consciousness. [1]

During the "Poetics and Perspectives of Media Art" table, Cláudia Giannetti, media art curator, writer, and theoretician, argued that information has become the new parameter of aesthetic theory and that simulation is what substitutes for the "idea of truth" in art. She used the projects of Ligia Clark, Robert Rauschenberg, Peter Weibel, and Walter Pichler to emphasize aspects of viewer immersion (physical or virtual) in artworks. In the process of immersion, she identified two kinds of perceptions: one that is its own visualization and one that results from simulation. The combination of both is what brings art closer to science. I couldn't agree more. On the subject of "Network Subjectivity," Sara Diamond, a video artist and artistic director at The Banff Centre in Canada, presented a very specific use of science and technology. She talked about processes of collaboration, exemplified by her work CodeZebra OS/experience, a visualization software for social interaction in which people become animal shapes; the project is a web-based chat and discussion tool. Diamond also creates performances within the context of the Internet under the label "Online Environments as Creative Collaboration Spaces." For Diamond, performance is a social theory in which the ideas of acting and culture are united. Therefore, performance is used as a tool of transformation in order to make the emotion of collaboration more explicit.

In terms of its diversity of approaches and ideas about media art, the "*Immersive Virtual Spaces*" table was the one that raised the most heated discussion among conference participants. In particular, members of this table questioned the need to build caves in order to experience immersion in a time of globalization and collaboration. I heard comments such as, "Why have this experience alone, when the world is becoming one?" And, "Shouldn't we avoid this restricted use of technology and make it available to all?" Arlindo Machado, professor of Cinema, Radio, and TV at the University of São Paulo and member of the Graduate Program of Communication and Semiotics of PUC-SP, alluded to Plato's famous metaphor when he said, "We shouldn't worry about entering or leaving the cave. We should work with the dichotomy between the internal and external, virtual and real. The idea of cave is one that enhances our experiences of the world, without excluding them from their social parameters." I was satisfied with this answer -- maybe because it was really good; maybe the subject simply touched me personally.

"The New Biological Paradigm" table -- which I expected to be the most controversial one -- was certainly the most brilliant. A set of scientific questions, spiced up with a touch of philosophical concerns, energized the presentations and elevated the discussions. Roy Ascott and Eduardo Kac are the last two symposium speakers I will mention here. Ascott introduced his "Art and the Biophotonic Web" as the convergence of bits, atoms, neurons, and genes generating "moist media." Based on "moist media," a computational system of biologically wet living processes, our identities are always in flux. Ascott once stated: "Computer networks, in short, respond to our deep psychological desire for transcendence -- to reach the immaterial, the spiritual -- the wish to be out of the body, out of mind, to exceed the limitations of time and space, a kind of bio-technological theology." [2] Might "globalization" -- in the benevolent social sense -- arouse this same desire in us? I wonder… Kac suggested that Darwin's theory must be revised since evolution as such has become artificial and technology must be used for remapping the configurations of human beings. His statement corresponded with Ascott's ideas about the generation of moist media. It was hard to disagree with any of them, although it was also new for me to think of art as a means for such scientific purposes.

Considering the divergence of themes and different approaches, the symposium was certainly thought-provoking, but it had little relation to the exhibition. There should have been a better link between the two, to better illustrate the range of theories and ideas the symposium presented. It is also noteworthy that several artworks in the exhibition had technical problems; some computers simply broke down. It seems ironic considering all the discussions bringing up the fact that man after all controls the machine. It is important to think of technology as a tool for a new avant-garde, but it is also important to actually make it function!

[1]Geert Lovink, "The Memesis Networked Discussion" in: *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future,* Ed. Timothy Druckrey with Ars Electronica (The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999), pp. 152-157

[2] Roy Ascott, "Gesamtdatenwerk: Connectivity, Transformation, and Transcendence" in: *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future*, Ed. Timothy Druckrey with Ars Electronica (The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999), pp. 86-89