INFORMATION AND FORM:

Electrolobby at Ars Electronica 2000

(http://electrolobby.aec.at)

Lev Manovich

Form. Good Form. Ideal Form. Gestalt. Malevich's abstract compositions, made of geometric primitives floating in outer space. Lissitzky's Prouns, extending Malevich's elements into the 3rd dimension in the anticipation of International Style solids, soon to populate every modern city. Mondrian's grid-making procedure, cutting a rectangle in this or that way with a certainty of some industrial robot. Arp's and Bruncusi's biomorphic shapes. Forms made of wires by Gabo, Smith, and others. Drawings carefully made by Gestalt psychologists to demonstrate human innate preference, or the need, to delineate "good form" in any pattern which comes into the visual field. Human: the form seeking animal?

The obsession with form in modern art is accompanied by its double – a fascination with "formless": from Jean Dubuffet's figures disappearing in the ground to Pollock's network of drips to Lucio Fontana's and Gordon Mata-Clark's form-destroying gestures.[1] But just as iMac quirky brilliance only highlights Microsoft hegemony, this ant-form stream in modern art only emphasizes the hegemony of form makers whose objects now fill art museums around the world, from MOMA to Tate Modern. Switching off their cell phones, wireless modems, Palm Pilots and other information appliances at the entrance, the citizens of information society can enter these temples of good form to seek the temporary relieves from flows of data which rule their lives outside. There they can feast themselves on Mondrian's rectangles, Malevich's triangles, Arp's and Moore disciplined curves, Aimes's chairs, Starck's famous sauser, and even Pollocks's

---

[1] See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss *Formless: A User's Guide* (Mit Press, 1997).

network of colorful drips. The latter may look at first like a computer network – yet, confined to the frame of a painting, its "pockets" fixed once and for all on canvas, it is a universe apart from a real telecommunication network which never stops to arrive at anything fixed, the bits of data in constant movement.

Information. A click by the user which fires of a server request which fires of a script which fires off an application which extracts some data from a database which is send to another script which formats it and ads a custom Flash animation, the whole thing served back to the user's screen within a second, while the user already made another click to start another chain of processes. Sixteen millions lines of code which make up current Windows operating system, calling each other to satisfy user's simple information craving, manifested as a taping on a computer keyboard. A commuter in a television ad accessing his stocks via WAP browser in his cell phone while glancing on a overhead display to see if his plane is already boarding and simultaneously checking the time on his watch; all of these displays constantly shifting (watch readout, airport display board, the information in WAP phone browser) as though in some elaborate nineteenth century ballroom dance. Streams of phone conversations, numerical data, pixels and sound bits, floating together through a fiber optic channel, entering the gate of network router, to be split into numerous streams, only to reunite at the destination. Demonstrations, protests or simply large parties, "self-organized" on the spot as participants call each other on cell phones, setting up a chain reaction as a result of which large groups of people gather in one place in half an hour. Jam sessions, "net parties," and other forms of social networking activities organized around telecommunication and computer networks. The gatherings of net artists and net activists moving from one city to another; endless "projects" which always involve multiple sites and multiple participants. Rarely any of these activities result in something which can be called "good form" or 'formless' or even leave behind any finished "art objects" except multi-page proposals and grant applications. And yet this does not mean that this is not genuine "culture" or "art" of our time.

The contrast between form and information is one of the fundamental cultural dimensions which accompanies the shift from industrial to information society; or from modernism to what I would like to brand "informationalism"[2] What search for good form was for modernism, information networking is for our own society. And if the first usually resulted in solid objects – geometric abstractions, sculptures and 3-D constructions, chairs and teapots, office skyscrapers and photographs – the second is by its very nature dynamic, never thickening into something solid and fixed.

And yet, as the word inFORMation implies itself, there is a hidden form-making impulse in information society. Or at least, we can say that information processes often leaves material residues. Or, to be more brutal but more honest, that information processes can be forced to leave material forms. Artistic networks made possible by Internet leave behind some kind of material activity: Web sites, written manifestos (or at least email postings), exhibition catalogs. And Web sites can be reduced to screen shots or listings of computer code, be it XML, CGI or ASP.

Since modern art, modern aesthetic theory, the museum complex, and the capitalist economy at large are designed to deal with material objects rather than with immaterial information networks, our first automatic response can be to try to force information networks into material traces and objects. More challenging is to figure out how to represent, document, and ultimately support social networking as a genuine cultural practice in its own right; how to present in a museum or gallery setting information networks and processes while giving justice to their dynamic character; in short, the ways to *translate information into form* which are intrinsic rather than alien to this information.

Following a few experiments where a contemporary art festival became a setting for a real-time social networking activity (such as Workspace at Documenta X, 1997), 2000 edition of Ars Electronica Festival presented *electrolobby* --"a dedicated area inside the Ars Electronica Festival designed

---

[2] See www.manovich.net/ia.

expressively for the net-inspired digital culture and lifestyle."[3] Skillfully morphing between various speech genres of contemporary culture, Paris-based TNC network which organized *electroloby* introduced it as "a marketplace of opinions, projects, branded cultural commodities and their pirated bootlegs — a networked showroom where ideas are on display and communication is the coin…Genetic researchers meet experimental entertainers, food jockeys mingle with MP3 mixers, game designers kibbutz with concept engineers." Following its I.P.O. (Initial Public Opening), *electrolobby* run for the whole duration of festival. I did not see any "food jockeys" in the program, but other announced residents indeed represented an exiting mix of net-inspired culture: Kodwo Eshun, the author of *More Brilliant Than The Sun*; Lincoln Stein who used Napster paradigm to create a program for publication of genome data; Eric Zimmerman, the author of super-addictive SISSY FIGHT 2000; and a dozen or so other personalities and groups, including the bad boys of the Net, the ever present *etoy*.

Did *electrolobb*y worked at the end? Has its organizers succeeded in translating information into form? Like the net itself, *electrolobb*y attempted to combine various media paradigm: publishing (the festival catalog and the Web site features interviews with all the participants), Web-casting (a part of *electrolobb*y was reserved for a small Web-casting studio which broadcasted live over Internet daily interviews with the residents and other specials) and a club-like setting whose intention was to create "an atmosphere conducive to communication among participants, and to a playful process of dealing with information." I am not sure that all these parts came together to form a new gestalt, however. Since *electrolobby* was taking place alongside with many other activities of a festival, most booths reserved for the participants were always empty; obviously the participants were busy catching other festival offerings. And since *electrolobby* area also featured a bunch of computers for email access, my sense is that checking and answering their email became more important for festival visitors than focusing on *electrolobby* presentations. But it is also possible that to expect a form, a single gestalt to emerge here is to apply old logic to net

---

[3] http://electrolobby.aec.at.

culture. It is possible that ambient, peak-free atmosphere of *electrolobby* – a few people talking in one corner; one group showing their project to another; no big openings or speeches but something always taking place; things happening in parallel and in small increments rather than in liner succession and in big jumps – indeed translated the logic of the net into the right spatial-temporal modality. Yes, information can be translated into form, but this form itself is quite different from the old forms of art, be it Mondrian's "good form" geometric primitives or Pollock's "formless" drips.