Welcome to the Multiplex:

Documenta 11, New Generation Film Festival (Lyon), LA Film Festival's New Technology Forum

Lev Manovich

I was struggling how to fill 1000 words talking about Documenta 11, when I was hit with a solution: why not talk about all three festivals I attended this June: Documenta 11 in Kassel; New Generation, the first edition of a brand-new film festival in Lyon; and Los Angeles Film Festival's New Technology Forum. Since all three events focused on new (or not so new) directions in moving image production and distribution, this will be the focus of this review.

Just as the last time when I went to see Documenta 10 (1997), attending the new Documenta left me with the same feeling: what's the big deal? On any given day in New York or London you can just go to whatever museum and gallery shows happen to be running and you will see as many first-rate work by as many brand-name and "emerging" artists. Of course it is nice to go to Documenta parties (although this is not Venice) and to sit in a cafe outside the main exhibition hall trying to recognize the cultural celebrities going in: here is Stuart Hall…here is Walid Ra'ad whose Atlas Group presented one of the smartest and though-provoking projects of the whole Documenta.

While the new Documenta made a real effort to open itself up to global multi-culturalism, the result was quite contradictory. The show in Kassel was presented as the final "Fifth Platform," with the first four platforms having taken place during the preceding year in Vienna, Berlin, New Delhi, St. Lucia and Laso focused on topics such as "Creolite and Creolization" and "Under Siege: Four African Cities". Unfortunately one could not learn anything about these previous four "platforms" without buying the thick catalog – there was no reference to them in the art show itself.

The long list of artists shown in Kassel had plenty of people outside of Europe and US, including the group Igloolik Isuma Productions whose film Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner) won a Prix D'Or for best debut feature film at Cannes 2001. However, looking at the spatial layout of Documenta grounds it became clear that each of three key buildings gave the largest central spaces to the older European or US white artists such as Allan Sekula, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Constant. I had the feeling that Documenta curators put on mini-retrospectives of these artists, added more big images of German photographers and conceptual 1970s artists, and then filled the remaining smaller and peripheral spaces with actual contemporary art.

Going through the show I also had the feeling I was in a kind of artist's cinema multiplex. Although I have not counted, it felt that at least half of all the Documenta artists presented "video installations" which almost all followed the same standard exhibition format: a projection presented in a small room. At least in a commercial movie theatre you get comfortable seats, Dolby surround sound, and you can bring in a coke, but since Documenta was about "serious art" and not the pleasures of mass culture, a typical room had hard and uncomfortable benches. Somebody pointed out to me that all video and film installations presented at Documenta together added up to more than 600 hours of runing time. Somebody else noted that the size of video and film installation rooms varied accordingly to the prestige of a an artist The films by Jonas Mekas and Ulrike Ottinger, the veterans of experimental filmmaking, which were between five and sex hours each, were put in larger rooms which had a few row of comfortable chairs, like in a real movie theaters. Many other videos were struck in small rooms with a single bench.

Given my interest in new forms of cinema I was attracted to a number of multi-screen installations at Documenta, including works by such heavyweights as Isaac Julian, Chantal Akerman, and Eija-Liisa Ahtila. I thought that Ahtila's three screen installation worked the best: you feel that she is seriously researching a new grammar for a multi-screen cinema. (She is currently a subject a solo exhibition at Tate in London).

One great new media project that I did see at Documenta was OPUS (software and accompanying theoretical package) by Raqs Media Collective (New Delhi). Unveiled in Kassel, OPUS is definitely the most interesting new media project I have encountered in quite a while. It is a sophisticated, both theoretically and technically, system for multi-user cultural authorship in a digital network environment. Do take a look at the site and check their new concept of "Rescension" (in OPUS Manual) that offers a very interesting way to address the difficult issues of authorship in our "remix" culture. OPUS raises the bar for all future practical and theoretical work dealing with digital authorship.

The paradox of an art show which became a multiplex movie theatre became further apparent after I visited the brand new film festival in Lyon called New Generation. Approximately one third of a festival was given to artists' videos. However since this was a film festival rather than art show, the short videos were packaged together in ninety minute programs shown in a movie theatre – in contrast to Documenta which followed the art convention of giving each video its own room. For me, nether interface makes much sense – why not put all video on a computer server and set up comfortable personal stations where viewers can access and watch any video in any time, the way it was done already a few years ago in KIASMA museum in Helsinki. KIASMA digitized thewhole collection of Finnish video art which was then put on museum servers accessible through PCs set up in a special media room. In the museum

Next it was to a day of panels together entitled New Technology Forum at Los Angeles Film Festival. After a conservative Documenta and a sleepy Lyon DV marathon, here I finally some real cutting edge stuff - new advances in machinema, video creation software running on cell phones, Hollywood and military colloborating on new AI simulations, and the like. Once again, I was given the proof that creative techno-avant-garde is not in Kassel, Lyon, and other traditional citadels of "real culture" but in Los Angeles, literally next door to Hollywood studios.

Katherine Anna Kang (Fountainhead Entertainment) talked about a feature-length film her company is working on using a custom machinema system. (For those who don't

know, machinema is a subculture of amateur filmmakers who use computer games as movie making tools. She called this new kind of cinema "machinemation."

Another paradigm that also uses game-like real-time 3D scene generation was demonstrated by Jeff Rickel from the University of Southern California (USC) notorious Institute of Creative Technologies. The institute was established a few years ago with funding by US Army to work on new types of military simulations using Hollywood talent. Rickel showed a particular "peacekeeping scenario. " Written by a veteran Hollywood writer, it involved a scene with three virtual humans in a stressful situation. The goal of the simulation is to teach a soldier what to do in an ambiguios situation. The scenario used high-end AI that controls virtual humans' emotional expressions, speech, etc. If traditionally simulations focused on machine operations (airplane, tank, etc.) and battle action, USC work can be better thought of as interactive narrative, where the user (the trainee) is presented with a dramatic scenario with simulated humans.

Bart Cheever from D.FILM festival (the digital film festival running since 1997) presented the gems from Digital Silverlake mini-festival he curated earlier this year. Created by artists, filmmakers and designers living in Silvelake and other areas of East LA, the works in Digital Silverlake represents the next stage in the evolution of moving image aesthetics. If 1995 article "What is Digital Cinema" I defined digital cinema as compositing of live action + image processing + 2-D animation + 3-D animation, since then a new generation of designers who grew up with Flash and Shockwave started to make short films and music videos which also add typography and also privilege 2-D flat look as the key visual aesthetics. To put this differently, while we see more and more "hybrids" films which use plenty of compositing, 3D and 2D animation, but still have an overaall "film" look (i.e., they present us 3D photorealistic space) - such as "Amelie" (2001) – there is also now a diffirent type of "hybrid" films which look more like what we expect to find in illustration and graphic design. I call this new type of digital cinema aesthetics "Post-Fash Cinema."

Another igital cinema pioneer Jason Wishnow (who two years organized the first festival of films for Palm Pilot platform) suggested that a movie trailer could be the prototype of a new genre appropriate to micro-cinema running on cell phones, Palms, Pocket PCs, and similar devices. He also discussed aesthetic features that characterized micro-cinema during the one hundred years of its history (from Kinetoscope to Palm) such as close-ups and loops.

On a distribution side, Ira Deutschman (Emerging Pictures) talked about his company's to plan to have 200 digital movie theatres in three years by placing digital projectors in already existing but under-utilized screening spaces such as museums. In his system, a digital film files will be downloaded to a local server installed in a theatre, since the files will be too bid to dounload in real time.

In June, I found the cutting edge of moving image culture in Los Angeles. However, I am spending the next three months in Berlin, and I am sure I will see enough for another report by the end of the summer.

LINKS:

http://www.documenta.de/
http://www.opuscommons.net/main.php
http://www.opuscommons.net/templates/doc/manual_left.htm ("Rescension" concept)
http://www.cinemanouvellegeneration.com
http://www.lafilmfest.com
http://www.dfilm.com/
http:///www.newvenue.com/
http://www.manovich.net/docs/augmented_space.doc (on video installations as cinema)