April in Paris: Signs of Artificial Life along the Seine

by Carol-Ann Braun.

The idea of blending art into city life is not new and has been associated with technology from the start. Our paper will consider programmed, generative art works in the context of two art historical antecedents, the Futurists in the 1910s and the art movement Fluxus in the 1960s. We will focus on a selection of installations in the streets of Issy, France, during the “Festival Premier Contact” organized by Le CUBE and curated by its Art Director, Florent Aziosmanoff (April 2005). The artists discussed will be laKitchen, Roland Cahen, Damaris Risch, Vincent Lévy, among others.

We are interested in the way in which the emancipation associated with modernity a hundred years ago is both empowered and tempered by code, an essential and invisible component of each installation. At issue here: the conditions of creativity (and mediation) at a time when invisible “interfaces” have re-structured the relation between author, artwork, spectator... and life.

Emblematic of Paris’ flourishing multimedia avant garde, the work featured in the “Festival Premier Contact” is largely produced in the Atelier of a multimedia center called « LeCUBE », in Issy-les Moulineaux, a suburb of Paris. Sponsored in part by France’s Ministry of Culture, LeCUBE also owes a great deal to the mayor of Issy, André Santini. Known for his outspokenness, Santini has ambitions for his city, currently headquarters to Bouygues (owner of France’s number one private television station, TF1), Canal+, Arte, and France Telecom’s Research and Development, just to name a few. Issy is strategically placed in an area called l’Arc de Seine, not far from an abandoned Renault manufacturing plant, slated for a new museum for contemporary art. Other cultural projects in the area are in the works—renovating an old Vauban fortress into a hothouse for cutting-edge technology and constructing media buildings that would serve as permanent displays for electronic art. Nowhere else in France do the words art, technology, and real estate coincide with such force.

A love story in real time

Between 15 and 24 April 2005, you would not have found any useful information on the electronic bulletin boards of Issy, in the suburbs of Paris. A third of the boards at the city’s intersections
displayed “Fiction d’Issy,” a love story programmed by Jean-Pierre Balpe. Written in real time, each successive sentence of this romance was peppered throughout the city. Passersby with a cell phone could influence the content by dialing up a special number and hitting any key between 0 and 9. A sentence would then pop up on their phone screen, which the caller could choose to validate and send off to the municipal bulletin boards. (The entire ongoing novel is available at http://www.fictionsdissy.org.)

Known for creating algorithms that generate surprisingly poetic books, Balpe is the director of the doctoral program Société, Information, Informatique, Culture at the University of Vincennes, Paris VIII. Invited to participate in the “Festival of Premier Contact,” a show of electronic art in the streets of Issy, Balpe created a hybrid voice—neither his, his machine’s, nor ours, but all three together—which had everyone wondering who wrote what over several square kilometers.

The Festival Premier Contact is a breath of fresh air in a city whose multimedia environment, like that of most other cities, is swamped by messages generated by the advertising industry. It also revives a tradition of public art at a time when new forms of expression are often tucked behind the screens of personal computers. The issues raised by this festival, however, are unsettling. They harken back to an aesthetic tradition well anchored in 20th-century art practices, all the while introducing new elements that disturb our familiar, time-worn avant garde.

**Between art and life**

Indeed, the idea of blending art with technology into city life isn’t new. In 1909, the Futurist Filippo T. Marinetti was among the first to react to the advent of photography and cinema by advocating an art of “life and action:” figures eroded by the effects of speed, music composed of concrete sounds rather than musical notes, and electric theater events staged on busy city streets. The Futurists considered the city itself to be “a moving, ephemeral work of art.” Their work went beyond the limits of the written page, the musical partition, or the painted canvas to include bits of everyday life. Rooted in new techniques for representing the world, the Futurists believed art could help renew our vision of society itself.

Work “in the field between art media and life media” was taken up by subsequent avant gardes, in particular the founders of the art
movement Fluxus in the 1960s and 1970s. Fluxus artists were among the first to use the postal system: known as mail art, postcards sent around the globe knit what the artist Peter Frank called a “grand-scale orchestration of giving and receiving.” Seen in this larger, life context, art is no longer about creating fixed objects to be contemplated in the rarefied atmosphere of museums or galleries. Rather, art is a situation that brings into question a larger network of people and media. In its most extreme forms, Fluxus strips art to the bare bones of direct experience and everyday language, suspending time for a fraction of a second, turning the flow of life into an aesthetic experience.

Many of the works selected for the Festival Premier Contact exemplify the Fluxus aesthetic. LaKitchen’s SQUARE 2 is a sound installation hidden in the slides, swings, and wooden slats of a neighborhood playground. Interactivity reaches its peak around noon, when the park fills with kids. Recording devices snatch bits of conversation, note speech patterns, and generate artificial dialogues that mingle with the ambient laughter. Other sounds like paper thrown into a garbage can or footsteps on the wooden walkways are also captured, transformed, and played back. In some respects, this installation is a Futurist dream come true, a composition made from processed scraps of real life.

**The autonomy of code**

And yet … the emancipation associated with modernity a hundred years ago is tempered here by code, an essential and invisible component of each installation. Tournez Sons {Sound Roundabout}, by Roland Cahen, is located at a bus terminal. It generates a medley of electroacoustic signals that ricochet along a set of eight speakers. The piece straddles a programmed “inside” and a random “outside”—the intensity and the evolution of each musical element is geared to the noise of incoming and outgoing buses. Cahen’s open score includes a blend of melodies (some based on barely recognizable snippets of classical music), prerecorded voices (including that of bus drivers, pedestrians, and a child who gives the time of the day every 15 minutes), and rhythmic elements, all woven to respond to an unpredictable environment.

In effect, the piece mimics the outside world. It also seems to mock it, in a playful back and forth between the city and the more artful sounds echoing out from hidden loudspeakers. The effect is eerie and mischievous, as passersby gradually notice, differently, the
world around them.

Although Cahen’s composition is incomplete without input from the outside world, also it has, paradoxically, a new and unprecedented form of autonomy. It’s tuned to us, regardless of whether we are attuned to it. The shift is philosophical in scope. To the question, Does a musical event occur if there is no one to play or hear it? this work answers, Yes. It generates music in obeyance to a set of algorithms. Not even the composer has any say in the final output, once he launches his program. The artwork is no longer his nor really ours to create. It becomes part of the cityscape and its digital networks. It includes us in passing. At issue, then, are the conditions of creativity and mediation at a time when invisible interfaces restructure the relationships between author, artwork, spectator, and life.

Figure 1. Damaris Risch’s animated selfportrait, A Distance, reacts to viewers’ gestures, noise levels, and other factors.

Indeed, these artworks hide their artifice. The result is intelligent behavior, seamlessly mediated by laser beams, discreet cameras, and camouflaged hard drives. When applied to images rather than sounds, looking at art feels like being engaged in a conversation. A Distance—Damaris Risch’s animated self-portrait that she projects onto a large electronic billboard (with a PC hidden in its base; see Figure 1)—evokes innocence, duplicity, kindness, or spite depending on a range of factors. These factors include gestures
made by the viewers standing in front of it, ambient noise levels, the time of day, and the mood of the work itself.

**Inside/out**

Programmed with Virtools, Risch’s piece is structured around a semantic map, which organizes more than 100 still photographs into related sequences. Virtools, coupled with a neural network, generates an extremely subtle range of responses to the gestures and attitudes of those who pause in front of the portrait. The effect is compelling: We communicate with the image, and it communicates with us.

The experience is both intriguing and frustrating. It’s intriguing because we’re not averse to taking a bit of time to join a game. It’s frustrating because our interlocutor isn’t always cooperative. We are not, as in a game, in a win or lose situation; rather, we’re in a never-ending dialogue, with no resolution in sight. Often, Risch’s face turns away, it closes its eyes or seems to be tolerating or ignoring us. We’re not a consumer in a museum skipping from room to room. We aren’t in front of a machine we can turn off. We’re trying to please it/her, and though we can be rude and turn away, it isn’t with an easy indifference.

At the Premier Contact Conference scheduled during the Festival, Isabelle Rieusset-Lemarié evoked the “decentering effect of crossing trajectories—ours, and that of the work.” Are we or are we not the same as the work, and in what ways? And what does the work make of us?

Vincent Levy’s *Fantômes* (see Figure 2) works more like a mirror, overlapping evanescent images of passersby with those of previous viewers and prerecorded fictional characters. If a viewer lingers, his image gradually becomes more precise, less ghost-like; with time, the machine holds on to it and brings up images of like-minded people. The rationale behind the weave of faces isn’t always clear, but intention is undeniably at work. The video–mirror isn’t just a reflective mechanism, it’s a thinking one. It sucks us into its fictional space and plays with our representation, depending on how we behave in relation to it.
This enhanced form of video isn’t just a medium; it has become a presence unto itself, a mediator in a narcissistic game of representations. What part of this exchange is symbolic? What part is real? To say, simply, that we have become active participants rather than passive spectators is to ignore the fundamental shift that separates this “art in life” from 20th-century counterparts. The interactivity here is between humans and signs endowed with an artificial intelligence that understands us.

**Signs as Hinges**

In France, Yves Jeanneret and Emmanuel Souchier were among the first to analyze hyperlinked signs in conventional digital media. They coined the term *signes passeurs*, or signs that act like hinges. Hyperlinked signs not only have symbolic value subject to interpretation (like an arrow) but use value as well, transforming them into tools (like what it takes to turn a page). What we once considered as separate, such as “you don’t have to know how to read in order to turn a page,” is now conjoined. In a way, signes passeurs are where hardware and sign systems meet. They’re by nature hybrid—half-visible, half-hidden, sandwiched between code and gesture, medium and genre.

These signes passeurs are a crucial, though passive, component of the art forms discussed here. They unveil information when prompted to do so by a user. What happens, then, when digital signs turn into scanning devices that analyze our behavior and adjust their inner worlds accordingly? It’s tempting to make a pun.
and say that artificial intelligence augments the digital signe passeur by digitizing the *signe passant*, or passerby. The work interprets our own presence as a “sign.” It digitizes us into its own world. Just as the spectator interprets the symbolic language of an artwork, here the artwork interprets the spectator’s world as a set of symbols. At the least, part of our world—part of our body language or spoken language—has been digitized. We have become intelligible to the art object and this is new.

**Leaping into robotics**

Florent Aziosmanoff’s *Chaperon Rouge* [Little Red Riding Hood; see Figure 3] transcends the art of image making by taking a leap into robotics. Aziosmanoff’s reenactment of “Little Red Riding Hood” involves three Sony Aibos. Aibos are cute robots that look and act like dogs. They not only wag their tail but they snuggle, nod, perk their ears, and generally seem to have a life of their own. One is dressed in red, one in orange (the big bad wolf), and one in green (the woodsman). All three are programmed to respond to each other according to color codes. The wolf sniffs about until he sees red, and then jumps on little Red Riding Hood, who submits to him as soon as he is within eyeshot; the wolf, in turn, is cowed by the woodsman as soon as the green robot is nearby.

![Figure 3. In Florent Aziosmanoff’s Chaperon Rouge, three Sony Aibo robots reenact the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” with passersby. A curious dog sniffs the woodsman.](image-url)
Globally, they constitute a multi-agent environment, with each robot programmed to adapt itself to any individually experienced situation. Left on the sidewalk to act out their interactive drama (or ignore each other if that’s how things work out), they’re resilient. Should they fall, they know how to get back up on their feet, for example. This much said, any passerby wearing red will attract the attention of the wolf. Symbolically, Aziosmanoff’s robots aren’t just animated objects, but—via code and device—part author, actor, and story as well.

Kids understand the idea, and love it. For the duration of the festival, several reading and writing workshops were organized at the local public library so that children could invent their own fairy tales with intelligent agents in mind. In general, the public was responsive. It also helps that for every installation, two young and enthusiastic guides were there to help explain how and why things work. Not everyone, however, agrees on the final ramifications of this kind of art on city streets.

**Considering scale**

Speaking at the Premier Contact Conference, Francois Barré, head of the Department of Architecture and Conservation at the Ministry of Culture since 1997, regretted that the festival didn’t create new spaces on the scale of the buildings and blocks of the city itself. He wished there had been greater attention paid to the city as a collective space. He makes a good point—with the exception of the sound installations, the works selected for the festival relate to us on an individual level.

More than a comment about the present on a scale beyond our reach, these works propose on the whole a new mix of real and fictional time. *Les Mains* [The Hands], by Michaël Cros, is an example worth concluding on. Cros is a dancer, puppeteer, and video artist whose main area of interest is the relation between language and bodies. His contribution to the festival was built into a square tabletop, onto which he projected images of hands which crawl, face down. The movements of the hands were highly expressive and sensitive. Each had its own personality: some were gregarious, others shy, some free spirited, and others quite conformist. The most adventurous turned their palms upward when a viewer stretched out his own hand over the tabletop. Given a bit of time suspended in this way, the overlap of a real and a virtual
hand generated a baby hand. It grew to adult size, aged, and died as did all the hands, eventually.

Cros’ choice of hands as a motif was particularly pertinent for this show. We were, after all, at a festival titled “Premier Contact,” and hands are one body part strangers easily share. Cros’ hands are both immersed in the present and resistant to it. They are—just as we are—nourished by their immediate environment, but also inhabited as it were by their own memories.

In sum, we could say that memory chips have introduced a new form of interiority to representation. These new technologies have an impact quite opposed to that of photography and cinema on the 20th-century avant garde. This time, instead of stripping art to the bare bones of direct experience, technology has reinstated a privileged, hidden, and illusory space. We might go so far as to argue that code and its simulacra have been wedged into language. New artificially intelligent forms now share our body politic.

References

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