TOUCH AND GO:

HYPERFORMANCES, AUTOMATED TELLER MACHINES, IDENTITIES, SOCIAL RELATIONS

By Jeffrey Schulz

See it.
Feel it.
Touch it.
Experience it.

Scads of baby boomers no doubt get weak in the knees with this nod to the pinball wizard Tommy who pleaded some twenty years ago "See me. Feel me. Touch me. Heal me." But this appropriation of the Who is far from the anti-establishment, touchy-feely sentiments that are now attributed, rightly or not, to the 60s. The reworked refrain is actually a recent advertising campaign for Citibank ATMs. The campaign's shameless new-age component no doubt served its purpose well by stirring the nostalgic impulses of those boomers who sang along with Tommy. It was a brilliant new context for this hippie anthem — a psychologically packed site of technology, especially so for aging boomers who often feel literally blind to the impact of information technology on their own lives, and whose children often know more about it than they do.

But the decor on Citibank's ATMs was also part of a much wider campaign by this bank and the rest of the financial industry to make information surfing both pervasive and user-friendly — and of course to make a lot of money. From the recent wave of bank mergers — including the one between Chase and Chemical, creating the largest bank in the United States — to business section stories describing new "relationship" banking strategies, to op-ed cartoons showing ATM customers watching Disney's "Pocahontas" while they're performing transactions, it's becoming more and more clear that our future will be mediated by financial instruments like ATM cards, credit cards, debit cards and other financial/demographic currencies. Playing into this dynamic is the World Wide Web's enormous interest in insuring the security of credit card transactions. With all the anticipation of a mission into space — or, dare I say, cyberspace — stories seem to break almost daily that count down to when a secure credit infrastructure will launch us into a new age of "safe" web transactions. Where's the cyberspaceship headed anyway? But more importantly, what kinds of experience does touching an ATM screen activate?

It's all kind of touch and go, actually.

ATMs are, literally, tools that speed our travels. They allow us to simply touch a few surfaces and be on our way — quickly. But we not only perform our transactions at ATMs; we
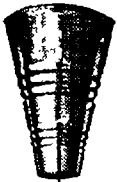
hyperform our tranceactions. We enter an ATM with a subtle sense, conscious or not, that we're somehow traveling, leaving our bodies behind — going into a trance — until our cash is delivered, our stocks traded, our balances transferred or checked. And in terms of hypertextual experience, ATMs long ago set the standard: multiply documented, transferred, routed, and transmitted, these transactions were hyper way before HyperCard dropped out of the Apple tree and our microminds were expanded with MacroMind Director. In this way, ATMs are much more closely aligned with William Gibson's use of the term cyberspace than is the relatively simple process of checking out a Web site in some remote part the world. Gibson well knew that the real importance of cyberspace would be fast finance, an info-dimension that most technoids continue to avoid as they dream in their interactive strawberry fields.

The expression touch-and-go also means up in the air, unknown or unstable. In demographic terms, it's that shifting sensation, the instability of our own identities that we register, for example, when we answer the phone and an anonymous telemarketer shockingly and surprisingly knows us by name — and maybe what we like to buy, a more shocking prospect. It's also the disorientation we feel when we call a bank to confirm a new credit card, and the issuer automatically activates the card simply because we call from a home telephone. This wouldn't happen if we called from, say, a pay phone (subtext: they know where we live). But it all makes sense to Citibank, and it again comes out in one of their ads: against a backdrop of the song, "Stand by Me," a woman praises her photo-id card, confidently declaring, "Citibank has really given us a new sense of self."

With this in mind, the rush of New York Telephone's intoxicating old slogan "We're all connected" returns, although this time with a swig of delirious social interaction as the chaser. Our social fabric now looks like a flickering landscape; a sometimes bewildering, constantly shifting admixture of the physical and the virtual. Touching an ATM screen is a social transaction from the outset, connecting us with other people — bankers, demographers, credit workers and more — and intertwining us into a shimmering matrix of social relations. The finger that elects "withdraw cash from credit card account" might no longer wrap itself around the physical hand of another human being, but it nonetheless activates very similar social and legal mores: trust, risk, support, moral and financial debt. In short, mutual dependency.

In fact, we're become dependent on ATMs, and they've become crucial to our survival. They're part of the air we breathe, and if we can't breathe it, we suffer a mild suffocation. This dependency is not necessarily a new idea. After all, it was way back in 1834 when Daniel Webster opined to the Senate, "Credit is the vital air of modern commerce." What's new is the pervasiveness of this air. Taking a cue from VISA's slogan "It's everywhere you want to be," transactions are no longer restricted to physical location. They occur pervasively and continuously.

On the subject of transactions, Steve Case issued a kind of challenge in his June, 1994, letter to AOL subscribers: "Be ready to transact. New media is about having relationships with customers, even entire markets. Get ready to have millions of transactions each and every second." Are we up to it? It's a little bit touch and go at the moment. But, given that another financial industry slogan is "Expect more from us," it's not a challenge we'll be able to ignore.

I've developed a tool, the Hyperformer, who meets Case's challenge head-on.

The Hyperformer rollersurfs the terrain of the Manhattan, weaving a path through taxis, heating grates, trucks, oil splotches, busses, cigarette butts, pedestrians, and other surfactants. It's from one ATM to the next, and the next, and the next, checking balances and withdrawing funds along the way.

This is science fiction this is not.

For the series last fall, titled Hyperformances 1.1: Synergistic Tranceactions, the Hyperformer wore an Armani shirt, Fendi tie, Body Glove surfing trunks, Leader swimming cap and goggles, and Rollerblades equipped with 80 millimeter 78 and 81A Hyper Shock wheels. Although the body of the Hyperformer belongs to me, the Hyperformer's legal agency and identity does not. The Hyperformer often check balances and make withdrawals with someone else's card — friends, gallery dealers, collectors — effectively turning the Hyperformer into the cardholder. It is, after all, the cardholder's information that makes the transaction, legally transferring agency from that cardholder to the Hyperformer. In this way, the Hyperformer is an identity entity, a container of sorts that is periodically filled and emptied of personal information — a sort of demographic currency, if you will.

The current series, titled Hyperformances 2.1: Crossing Tranceactions, is in progress. For each of five performances that occur over a ten week period, the Hyperformer dresses in a completely different set of clothing while skating a roughly 100-block stretch of Broadway that connects Lincoln Center and Wall Street, crossing the entirety of Manhattan's business districts in the process. The sabre maneuvers of the previous series have been replaced in the current project by a variety of activities, including: bouncing a large, three-foot in diameter yellow ball; using a cell phone to leave a recording of breathing patterns on my own answering machine; pulling another skater, who holds plastic tube reins connected the Hyperformer; wearing a wetsuit that's fashioned into a strait jacket while blowing a whistle; and more. These and other images, as well as performance descriptions, Hyperfictions and other textual material, are part of my web project, titled Touch & Go, which will be updated throughout the current series on äda 'web (http// :adaweb.com).

Regardless of the version, the Hyperformer is an investigative tool with which to unpack the multiple entities, trajectories, nodes, and meanings that circulate through an increasing number of our social and financial transactions. However, I should also mention that the Hyperformer is highly subjective, the product of my own hybrid educational background of international business and relations, and visual arts. As such, the Hyperformances allow me to navigate not only the emerging cultural spaces of information technology, but also the variegated terrain of my own psychic spaces. Rather than dividing and inspecting these various aspects separately, the Hyperformance series instead seeks to forge and maintain a variety of connections, exploring the always-intermediate interconnectedness that increasingly characterizes our experience. As an investigation into this experience, the Hyperformer attempts to link a variety of issues, including: freedom of movement and the surveillance of that movement; club fashion and techno culture; alchemical aspects of interacting with an ATM; the use of swimming and surfing metaphors in the context of information technologies; connections between information technologies and military traditions; the dispersion of identity; the influence of science fiction on business practices; extreme sports and extreme lifestyles; and others. The outgrowth of these links is a hybrid organism coupled with a hybrid analysis, the combination of which works toward developing relational tools for the emerging cultural spaces of information; spaces which are virtually real, really virtual, and endlessly flickering, shifting back and forth.