

# DEGREES OF FREEDOM

By Laura Trippi

latrippi@aol.com

**T**his paper is a cumulative piece, charting the transition from my work as curator at The New Museum, New York, over the past eight years, to my current project, which is to develop an infrastructure for exhibition practice that operates outside and between existing institutions. Reflecting on recent transformations in art and exhibition practice, I want to bring into focus art's participation in a widespread cultural shift toward open, networked, participatory systems. The infrastructure I envision utilizes networking technologies as part of a curatorial strategy that engages with this environment.

When I started at The New Museum in the mid eighties, thematic exhibitions were a genre on the rise. Such high concept exhibitions as *Damaged Goods*, organized by Brian Wallis for the museum in 1986, were not just shows, but thematic investigations, emphasizing art's close associations with a wider sphere of cultural effects. *Damaged Goods* helped to announce the advent of "commodity art," but also sought to illuminate a more pervasive trend, the "damaged" or precarious status of objects in an era of simulation. It situated art within a mediated landscape of consumer culture moving into hyperdrive.

At the same time, activist art practice was engaging the idea of a social aesthetic. The installation, *Let the record show. . .*, organized at The New Museum in 1987 by curator William Olander, is an example. Olander offered the museum's large shop window on Lower Broadway to the AIDS activist group, ACT UP, both as a platform for their sophisticated agit-prop and in recognition of ACT UP's contribution to the visual culture of our time. The installation resulted in the formation of the smaller collective *Gran Fury*, which went on to use the infrastructure of the art world — administrative and interpretive as well as financial — to gain access to venues otherwise beyond their reach: subway and bus poster projects, billboards, and the media coverage that their work eventually earned. The concept of the curator as a cultural producer, rather than an arbiter of taste, helped carry curatorial practice further into the realm of public culture.

During the late eighties, the art market's bubble economy swelled, affecting both art works and exhibitions. Increasingly works were passing into and through private and corporate collections. Even major museums were selling art from permanent collections to finance new acquisitions, as prices spiraled upward and government support for the arts continued to diminish. Collecting art became quite literally a futures market, with works continually moving from collection to collection. Circulation seemed to be superseding static accumulation as the primary condition of art.

As we moved into the nineties, the art market crashed; public and private sponsorship of the arts fell and continued

isea95@er.uqam.ca T : (514) 990-0229



ISEA95  
montréal

falling to further lows. Mobility, fluidity, and reconfigurability nonetheless continued coming to the fore in art works and exhibitions and in other institutional practices. Temporary exhibitions grew to dominate most museums' programming and permanent collections were sent into circulation.

Curiously, strategies that had been enlisted under the banner of postmodernity joined with the market in dispersing art from its "permanent" embrace within the confines of museum and private collections. Artists and curators increasingly deflected art out of the traditionally pristine precincts of museum and gallery display, to traffic in spaces freighted with the everyday. Performative works and artists' projects used the infrastructure of the presenting institution as a kind of material component of the piece, and engaged the viewer in the process producing the work. Exhibitions and artists' projects reflecting on collecting practices formed an ever widening stream. All these developments in art and exhibition practice seemed to index a broad based process of cultural restructuring around accumulation, with collections being recast as controlled systems of circulation.

At The New Museum, an emphasis on curatorial and institutional innovation created an environment that dovetailed with these self reflexive trends in the field. I came to consider temporary exhibitions as a distinct — and distinctly circulatory — type of collection. Like an archive, and not like a display case, thematic exhibitions in particular tend to emphasize the viewer's navigation through the space of display. The growing prominence of theme shows on the exhibition circuit, and of works dispersed from traditional venues and modes of display, reinforce the sense of steering through a variegated landscape — one whose elements are constantly in rotation. With this, recombining and reconfigurability have become striking features of the field.

Increasingly, thematic exhibitions echo the ways in which space and information are organized in electronic environments, pressing toward a sort of hypertextual design. Individual works implicitly invoke entire bodies of work, as well as a more or less open ended archive of related writings, ideas, artifacts, and locales. This indexical dimension highlights links within the field of art but also connects art directly to developments in other disciplines and cultural domains. With the growing emphasis on ambient, navigational aspects of aesthetic experience, on recombining and participatory forms, art begins to override the display paradigm that is so much a part of modern spectacle society and so allied with the idea and history of the museum.

As exhibitions broach the condition of hypertext, the limits of the theme show as an exhibition genre anchored in a circumscribed site seem to have been reached. Yet despite these shifts within and outside the field, curatorial practice has remained wed to a model derived from the museum — the centralized display of a collection of objects supplemented by explanatory texts. Meanwhile art projects on the Internet and CD-ROMs often ignore their grounding in offline networks of display, circulation, and exchange.

With the rapid expansion of access to the Internet and especially, more recently, to the World Wide Web, art institutions are awakening to the insistent snooze alarm of cyberspace. Leaping into the fray with home pages or other internet sites envisioned as elaborated organs of public relations or education, they have generally given little thought to the wide ranging programming implications posed by new technologies. Similarly, efforts to broaden audiences and to engage viewpoints and materials outside the field tend toward an assimilationist model, leaving basic programming structures untouched.

In art as in other fields, process continues to displace product, ceding center stage to the design of open systems that invite change along with participation on the part of users. Corresponding to this landscape of linked sites and dynamic systems, I envision a distributional approach to exhibitions, one that I'm pursuing through a project called Drawing on Air. In this networked curatorial model, the Internet will serve to map projects, work, and practices widely distributed across space and time as across disciplines, media, and type of site. Thematic webs will be ongoing, encouraging exchanges between online and offline sites and allowing for the continuing development of a given theme. Structure and process — design in the broad sense — will be treated as equal in interest and importance to the content of the thematic web.

Rather than establish the structure and operating mechanisms of such an infrastructure in the abstract, we're seeking to evolve it through a series of pilot projects. For the "adaptive" aspects of the infrastructure, we're looking to developments in artificial life and complexity science, among others, for models that map the dynamics of systems in a constant state of change. Improvisational methods in music and collectivist strategies in art practice, and anarchic social models, will be important sources in considering collective forms of production. From the field of business management, we're importing and experimenting with strategic, scenario based planning, and with concepts such as "re engineering" and "learning organizations" — change oriented, networked, and arguably participatory approaches to infrastructural design that the corporate world has been developing for some time.

The trend toward flexible, participatory structures — in art works and exhibitions, in business management, in the information/entertainment industry, among others — are often characterized in terms of greater individual freedom. But they can also be understood as marking an exponential increase of efficiency within a consumerist culture. As currently configured, "interactivity" means, primarily, greasing the wheels of consumption, while "participatory management" functions as a mechanism for retooling the work force, including ourselves, eking out greater yields of product and profit through the encroachment of professional concerns on what was once the space and time of private life.

Can the freedoms and constraints that characterize digital technologies be used toward other ends?

Western art theory and practice has often been informed by considerations of the reader/viewer's role in "producing" the work. It may be useful, in taking up technology as an aesthetic medium, to refer back to this heritage as a point of reference. For example, the Russian Formalists considered "literariness" to reside in those elements within a text that resist consumption as information, calling attention to the materiality of language. With this, readers relinquish their role as mere consumers and enter into dialogue with the text, becoming co-producers of the work through the act of interpretation.

In our engagement with technology, the interface figures as a barrier to no holds barred "interactivity," and so, implicitly, to the freedom that it connotes. But the idea that art resides, in part, in the resistance of materials puts interesting spin on the situation. Instead of seeking greater transparency of the interface, so that it yields more and more easily to the desire to consume, artists and curators might consider orienting their work toward investigating the interface itself as a material resistant to our will.

Just as the infotainment industry defines interactivity narrowly, structuring participation in the system as a species of consumption, the interface is pictured as the software environment where mouse and option meet. By concentrating in part on the design of a "post institutional" infrastructure for exhibition practice, *Drawing on Air* starts instead from an extended definition of the interface: those zones where patterns of social and economic activity, paradigms in science and technology, and subjective structures of thought and experience intersect, engaging with one another in complex, mutually determining ways. Art has a particularly decisive role to play here, holding open the possibility that "interaction" means participating substantively in the production of culture, including not just products but also the processes, that is, in the very modes of its production. The curatorial form of the theme show opens out into an adaptive archive, an evolving system for linking works of diverse media, modes, and materialities. Connecting more than collecting, curators will track and foster aesthetic practices along divergent migratory paths, as art and global capital together hack the logic of flexible accumulation.

© Laura Trippi 1995,  
October 29