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BUILDING A HOUSE ON SAND?:
IS THE DIGITAL WORLD SOLID ENOUGH TO
BE A NEW FOUNDATION FOR ARTISTS?

SUMMARY. Presentation of a Toronto-
based artists' centre focused on electronic
art. Discussion of the challenges it is
responding to and the implications of these
in a larger context. Examination of the
inter-relationships of the electronic artist,
artists' centre, computer technology, the
multimedia industry, and the Canadian
public and cultural spheres. Where is the
place for an artist-run centre in the digital
world?

This paper will examine inter/@ccess, a Canadian electronic
media arts centre dealing with changes and challenges which
are relevant to many people in electronic art. Inter/@ccess is
located in Toronto, a central point of the multimedia industry,
and a city which houses one of the largest arts communities
and computer nodes in Canada. The Board of Directors of
inter/@ccess is made up of Canadian electronic artists.

Over the past few years Inter/@ccess has faced many chan-
ges, among them: the increased permeation of computer
technology into society; rapidly expanding possibilities for art
creation with increased sophistication of hardware and soft-
ware, changes in the situation of electronic arts and the elec-
tronic artist; and dwindling government funding. How have
these changes affected inter/@ccess, and what are we going
to do as a result?

The artist-run network in Canada used to be called "the artist-
run movement" by its more radical proponents, but in recent
years most of the movements of this network have been
devoted to keeping itself alive. The first artist-run centres
emerged in the early 1970s, and they still embody the optimis-
tic, egalitarian and idealistic values of those times. The cent-
res were started by artists for artists, to provide an alternative
for the production and exhibition of art that was independent
of the marketplace and commercial constraints. Government-
funded in an arm's-length relationship, most centres take pride
in remaining democratic and open to everybody. This is
advantageous to emerging artists, and to those whose work
and/or world-views are not in favour with/of the current com-
mercial art scene. It also allows the public to see more varied
or difficult work than can be seen in commercial galleries. On
the other hand, artist-run centres have sometimes been accu-
sed of letting political considerations over-ride those of artistic
quality. It's certainly true that the centres as a whole are very
non-hierarchical, occasionally to the point of not getting things
done because nobody wants to take control. In most artist-
run centres, the volunteer Board of Directors is elected from
the membership, so the structure really does function from
the bottom up.

Inter/@ccess was started in 1983 by a group of Toronto artists
who were experimenting with videotext. After a few years,
they realized that videotext was not the way of the future, and
that there was more artistic promise in computer-based art on
a broader scale. So they bought a Macintosh computer and
set themselves up as a computer access centre for artists. At
around this time, they also inititated a bbs (bulletin board sys-
tem) for artists, called Matrix.

As the 80's raced to a close, more and more artists began
coming to inter/@ccess. They worked on the computers and
talked about upcoming software and exciting capabilities on
the horizon. Inter/@ccess started to host artist's talks about
the new technologies, and to offer artist-in-residencies for lon-
ger-term projects. The organization began to receive regular
support from the federal, provincial, municipal and local gover-
nments, and the annual budget grew to CDN$100,000
(US$74,000). It was always a struggle, and it came after years
of unpaid work, but eventually the centre could employ four
paid part-time staff members.

The situation was looking good at the turn of the decade, at
which point inter/@ccess had a grand total of two Mac IIci's,
with one colour monitor and one grayscale. Now, in 1996,
inter/@ccess can offer artists three good computers, several
colour and TV monitors, a videophone and a videoprojector,
ISDN connectivity, a colour flatbed scanner, a VCR and a cam-
corder. The working conditions are more pleasant, the pay-
ment structure is simpler, and membership rates are lower.

However, in 1990, inter/@ccess generated $25,000 of its own
revenue from the computer studio. This year we will be lucky
to make $5,000. This is a drop of $20,000, or 1/5 of the ope-
rating budget, in about 6 years.

What happened? Why have the sands shifted from under the
foundations of inter/@ccess?

This dramatic change for the worse in the revenues from the
computer studio was one of the items which caused
inter/@ccess to re-evaluate its priorities and come up with a
new mission statement.

The obvious answer is that as computers penetrate more and more thoroughly into society, artists who previously could not afford to buy their own, have now bought. It's also an open question as to what prompted members of one of the most individualistic, materialistic and self-centred societies on the planet, namely contemporary North America, to expect that collective ownership, collective use, and collective administration of highly specialized artistic production tools would ever work out

Although computer technology has permeated all levels of society, its novelty continues to blind us to our inappropriate uses and growing dependence. In Canada there's a little creature called the Ad Fairy, she is related to the Tooth Fairy, and she whispers the following words of wisdom into artists' ears as they dream about how to spend their grant money:
"Why share when I can own?"
"Why rent when I can buy?"
"The more computer power I have, the better my final product will be"
"It's new so it must be improved"
"It's compatible with what I have already so I probably need it somewhere"
and the best of all "If I buy computer stuff that I don't understand, I will doubtless become very brainy and impress all my friends when I have figured it out"

Mirroring the rest of society, a polarization has taken place so that most artists who have become serious about electronic art now have their own system, set up to their specifications. The people who need to rent time these days are the emerging artists, the dabblers and the beginners. Inter/@ccess is glad to be available for them, but this is not a sound ecology for an artist-run centre: ideally, veterans, mid-level people and beginners should be around to network and share knowledge and ideas.

The other artists' production centres in Toronto are also beginning to purchase computers of their own. First was the video post-production centre: they got the AVID suite. Video post was not an area inter/@ccess had intended to go high-end in anyway. since we knew the video centre would, but we lost those artists as mid-range clients as well. Two years ago, inter/@ccess had hopes of becoming the finishing centre for artists working in other media, who would to use our computers to manipulate work created in their own centre.
However, it's turning out that everybody wants slightly different components, so the film centre, the photography centre, etc. are largely buying their own. In addition, museums and larger public institutions in Toronto are starting to set up public-access computers, to draw people in and appear more with-it. There is also competition from the private sector, for example the ubiquitous Kinko's.

However, widespread purchase of computers is only part of the picture. Even though inter/@ccess only owns three computers, the increasing speed of change in the computer world, where the software giants battle it out, firing upgrades at each other like lightning bolts, has had a significant impact on our operations.

In the mid-eighties, Inter/@ccess initially set the policies of its computer studio based on the model of the video production co-op, where members pay by the hour to rent the equipment. This was feasible in a computer centre nine years ago, but inter/@ccess has now outgrown this model. First of all, rapid obsolescence makes it unfeasible to invest heavily in computer equipment Secondly, as a video artist, once you have learned the mechanics of the camcorder, you can go and begin shooting. In a computer centre, once you have learned the software, you can get ready to learn the upgraded version with the 15 new plug-ins due out next month.

The increased complexity of software is, for many artists, a mixed blessing. More options are available, and one might be able to get closer to one's vision, but it is also more difficult to make a choice and go on. This is not to suggest that every interesting piece of art made with the assistance of a computer must be complex; on the contrary. However, most artists will want to experiment, which is uncomfortable on a pay-per-hour basis. Canadian video artists have been able to apply for production grants for several years, which would pay for the time to explore options, but this type of funding is only now becoming available to a few electronic artists. Finally, with the more complicated softwares, incompatibilities occur with different startups, conflicting extensions, etc One inexperienced person who gets into the system folder and "just tries to speed things up a little" can make an awful mess for twelve other people!

As the potentials for electronic artists expand constantly, so do the learning curves. Inter/@ccess used to offer in-house technical help to artists. However, most artists could not afford the price of enough consultation to really be of use to them, and we could not afford to subsidize their learning time. In addition, it was difficult for inter/@ccess to find good consultants: we were paying about 1/3 of what such skills could command in the private sector.

Government funding in Canada is also declining. Globalization has caused contempt for anything which does not contribute directly to the bottom line, and dwindling public funding for arts is reviled as philistinism by some, but hailed as a return to the good old days by others. Would-be-deficit-free governments talk of cutting completely all cultural groups which do not generate at least 25% of their own revenue. At the same time, corporate sponsors are rejecting the traditional "arm's-length relationship" and demanding more decision-making power in exchange for their contributions. The bubble has burst, and any artist-run centre that didn't expect this was simply naive.

Individual artists have also had to adapt to the changes in public funding, and more and more of the electronic artists I know are gradually becoming commercial artists. CD-ROM manufacturers are eager to get their hands on cool multimedia content to move their products off the shelves, but few artists in this situation have creative control over their work They hope to be able to do their own work on evenings or weekends, but that's not the same as being in a really fruitful spell and being able to devote yourself to it for days. In addition to removing people from the general orbit of inter/@ccess, this has also had the effect of decreasing the volunteer pool The "Let's all get together, pitch in and make this happen" has been replaced by "I'm free for a breakfast meeting on Tuesday the 19th from 8:02 to 8:13."

Although it was inevitable at the time, many practices in the Canadian artistic realm were simply imported from Europe along with the fine furniture, without any re-thinking as to what might be more feasible on our rougher shores. When the first formal art structures developed in Canada, one of the strongest models and motivations was "Those Europeans display art in stately imposing art palaces so we should have that here too." The results of Canada's great museum expansion boom of the previous two decades reveal that this attitude was slow to change: "If we build it impressive, they will come". But not enough attention was paid by the arts institutions to exactly who 'they' were, what 'they' were getting out of their visits, and whether 'they' would continue to come. Only in recent years have outreach and education in the arts become crucial. As a result of this lack of focus on what would best suit the particularities of the Canadian situation, we have a visually illiterate, impatient public which is largely

ignorant of its cultural heritage, and which looks upon an art gallery visit chiefly as a shopping trip. Electronic art installations, which are slower than games and which offer nothing to buy, are considered even less relevant by the majority of people.

In the 90's, this jaded public has become even more skeptical, and reluctant to engage seriously with electronic images, thanks to edutainment, media TV and music videos, manipulated photos and simulated newscasts. In addition, the art object that you, an artist, create may now be a virtual space through which the visitor's avatar navigates. You and your piece take on the role of host to thousands of masked guests. You know that not all of these are guests you have invited Some of them are party-crashers of the worst kind. They will do their very best to hack into the surroundings you have carefully constructed They just bop around from Web site to Web site, looking for a good time It is easy to see why digital artists fear that if their work is not simple, quick and immediately entertaining, it will be overlooked, yet that if it is too shallow, it will be dismissed by other artists.

How should an artist-run electronic media arts centre position itself, in light of all the above changes? Is is even possible for inter/@ccess to define a stable place for itself in this digital rush hour?

For inter/@ccess, the answer was to change our mandate and priorities, and also to change our location physically to enable our new activities. In 1995, we moved to a new, nicer, space which made it possible to host exhibitions and events. And we concluded that the principal function of inter/@ccess could no longer be as a computer access centre for artists.

Instead, as decided by the membership, "Inter/@ccess is a community network and resource base to enable artists and the public to explore the intersections of culture and technology through the creation, exhibition, presentation and discussion of electronic art forms and new communications media."

More specifically:
"We provide entry points for people looking to get involved in the use of electronic technologies.
"And we supply an ongoing context for critical discourse for those who are well into their creative careers.
"We encourage knowledge-sharing, by helping people find others with whom they can collaborate.
"We present alternative views of the new technologies to those presented by mainstream media and government policy-makers.
"Our reach is international, but we retain a local focus as we believe the Toronto area has something unique to offer.
Members of culturally diverse communities are encouraged to participate."

Since the new mandate was adopted, inter/@ccess has hosted several successful exhibitions, usually accompanied by an artists' talk or panel discussion. We concentrate on installations, often interactive and/or time-based, as opposed to solely screen-based work. Like a happening, it's necessary for the visitor to be physically present to experience the piece, as her participation affects the outcome.

We make available free or discounted computer time for selected artists who are preparing an exhibition or an event at inter/@ccess, so that they may experiment freely without feeling the hourly costs mount up. In addition to project-based time, we offer a couple of what we call "Noodle Scholarships" so artists can just play around on the machines, which is often the best way to come up with a new idea. We have also set up a policy for User-Groups, where a group of artists who want to learn a new software can meet and share their knowledge. In addition, we have concentrated our equipment pur-

chases on items which artists would use infrequently and most likely not own, such as a colour scanner.

We have begun hosting a public discussion series, as a licensee of Kit Galloway & Sherrie Rabinowitz's Electronic Café International Santa Monica, in which we explore questions of the impact of digital technology on culture and electronic art We have also set up a small lounge area with a Web logon terminal.

We are also preparing a skills exchange database, where artists can list the softwares they are willing to teach, for cash or bartered services. If someone is willing to volunteer and help set up exhibitions, then that would get noted as well, and artists could help to keep their costs down. We're also looking at taking on an advocacy role in electronic art in Canada We collaborate with other organizations where we do not have the resources to undertake an event on our own. In essence, inter/@ccess has moved from being an end destination to being a central node, and also a conduit, in a network. Information and people, bringing with them their own knowledge networks and using ours as well, flow in and out depending on the needs of the particular project. We no longer focus solely on providing the hardware and software of computer access, but with our new mandate inter/@ccess participates in all aspects of the art-making cycle: research, creation, production, exhibition, critique and discussion in the Toronto electronic art community. We do not intend to be the final or only resource of the electronic artist, but an essential resource which also functions to point people to others.

The sands in electronic media will always be shifting. We all know that the tidal wave is only just beginning. If no stable home is possible, perhaps the answer is to live in a hovercraft.

We are hoping that artists will still want to come to inter/@ccess and meet others in the flesh, in spite of or maybe because of the increasing amount of time they spend interacting virtually. So after 10 years of struggling to build up a solid foundation with machines and hardware, we have come to realize that our new role is to be a conduit for humanware in the wired world.