

**WHAT ARE DREAMING YOUNG PIXELS OF?
- a pseudo quarrel on “supports” -**

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What is the pixels' gender, after all? Is it possible to speak about male-pixels and female-pixels? Wouldn't be better to say they are hermaphrodites, just like angels? The question is neither rhetoric nor ironic; on the contrary, it is getting more and more imperative to answer it today, when this entity called biocomputer enjoys such a rapid development. I am certain that, despite being are not sex discriminated the young pixels, as “qualia sensibles” would rather dream of playing the part of immaterial actants, since they consider themselves to be minimal subjects to the digital process of updating programs capable of generating digital objects and fictions. Naturally, they would also like to play some parts in a “new arena of representation”, seen as a “new **space** for revelation”.

The complexity of this theme is so fascinating and overwhelming that I will have to narrow it down to two particular sub-themes: **enunciation medium** and **reception medium**. The former being the medium upon which the computer produced work is transferred whereas the latter is creating an interactive relation between the work and the user.

An Arts History from the exclusive perspective of media (“support”) evolution would be rather interesting to write. In this respect, it is not difficult to notice the lack of a clear distinction, in all traditional arts, between media and means by which works are created. Similarly, there is no distinction between enunciation media and reception media (painting, books, etc). However, there is a general agreement on the artistic representation on a material “support”, an agreement established during the Renaissance and still observed by the iconological “theory of strata in a work of art” (Panofski, 1939).

A clear separation between media (“support”) and means of creation occurs at the same time with the appearance of recording means (mechanical, optical, chemical), such as photography, cinematography, discography or later video and television – all paradigmatic means of analogical expression. Media can be divided into enunciation media (films, magnetic tapes) and reception media (screen, computer display).

In Romance languages, the meanings of the terms: “means of creation” and “media” (“support”) are clearly distinguished. (The same distinction appears in German: Ausdrucksmittel and Unterlage). Unfortunately, the two meanings are covered by a single word in the English language, the word medium, which explains McLuhan's famous phrase: “The Medium is the Message”. The polysemantic aspect of the English language makes the understanding of this essay rather difficult, as my approach relies on the distinction between **means of creation** (materials, instruments, technique) and **Medium** (“**support**” on which works are transferred).

I fully agree with those theorists who uphold the radical difference between “hypermedia configuration” and “virtual reality”, the former being based on the conversion from analogical to digital while the latter refers to synthetic image generations, with no reference to reality. Both configurations can be accessed on disk (cd-rom, off-line) as well as on-line; in addition, there is a possibility to combine them. In order to simplify my exposé, I will restrict my approach to hypermedia configuration, including both disk and installation.

I conclude this introductory part with a personal remark which is also embraced by the members of my group, kinema ikon: out of the vast field of IT in full swing, we are almost

exclusively interested **in the validation of the digital system as a new means of artistic creation**. Digital works that do not fulfill this desideratum may be extraordinary or marvellous, but they do not belong to the artistic digital world. They are simply different.

An approach based on the opposition existing between “**support disk VERSUS support installation**” would be improper. I don't have anything against installation in general or against digital/virtual in particular. I have to admit they are both exciting and spectacular to public to such an extent that they, plus video-installations, projections, performances (analogical means) cover most of the space and time allotted to electronic art in grand international exhibitions (included ISEA). In contrast, works on “support” disk are allotted minimum space and time. Thus, installation (digital as well as virtual) tends to become an autonomous trade in contemporary art, while pixels remain mere assistants, integrated in the hybrid structure of installation “the true reic (Dingheit) support of the work” (Heidegger, 1957).

If we consider access modes, digital / virtual installation falls into the category of the “spectacular”(not in that of the “reading”) since it has created a sort of holding of “supports”. Thus, this hybrids device offers a combination of visual, auditive and tactile sensation as well as mental relations. Its effects are polymorphous, polysensorial and polyglot (as combination of languages). In addition, they are rather strange, reminding me of those “amateur” cabinets, of perspectives, anamorphoses and other catoptrics curiosities, which resemble Athanasius Kircher's “camera magica” – Wundercamern (1646).

If writing is the art of constructing a story and fixing it on “support” (medium), then installations (digital and virtual) can be seen as multiple writings staged by means of a proficiently computerized protocol. Digital installations can be also perceived as devices the “bricolés” type – in the sense given by Claude Lévi-Strauss: “process of pragmatic thinking during which individuals and cultures use objects in order to assimilate and develop ideas.” (1962) We should also consider in this respect Sherry Turkle's proposal, which can be summarized in the phrase “object – to – think – with” (1995); hence digital / virtual objects can be stirred to develop / generate ideas.

Movie making has escaped the “pressure” of installations and film as “support” has prevailed in this domain, although there were some attempts in the past to replace it: “the magic lantern” or the “cinéma élargie”. Meanwhile, video-art has been dominated from its very beginning (1963) by the structure of video installations to the detriment of magnetic tapes. It is this “legacy” which has highly influenced the development of digital and virtual installations.

I have heard (sic!) that the pixels in the structure of some digital or virtual installations, and with them the computer entity too, feel frustrated and suffer from alienation and oppressive anxiety. Schizophrenia or who knows what complex does not seem too far, either. We may find out soon about clinics offering cyber-psychiatric treatment to digital entities, hospitals built in the vicinity of MIT Media Lab, Art 3000, ZKM, a.s.o.

In order to avoid such an embarrassing situation, the best solution is in my opinion, to offer pixels the opportunity to play in a friendly environment, like, for instance that of the “support” disk. There are several substantial arguments to support this thesis, as well as the interactive reception on the monitor screen. Before mentioning these pro-disk arguments, it is proper to mention some of the arguments against it. I have to admit that I experienced moments of perplexity when I noticed that the main **impediment** in the reception of an artistic digital discourse on cd-rom could be found in the main characteristics of the digital system. First of all, it is this obsession to interact by all means, then the unpleasant manipulations on command interfaces; it is the noise produced when

pressing the keys, the “click” on the mouse, the belated reaction to orders; furthermore, there are differences in speed between the visual and the auditive discourse, which bring about gaps in the relation image – sound. Also, due to subsequent appearance of images, there is a persistence of disturbing fluency in the syntagmatic plan of the discourse. Finally, loading cd-roms on-line can be also difficult.

All these drawbacks can be felt now in December 2000 with instruments / computers which are not extremely performant. I am convinced that all these flows will be soon forgotten and, so I am going to concentrate on the **advantages** of using “support” disk (cd-rom, dvd etc.) instead of using digital installation:

1. There are fewer opportunities of negative manipulation on “support” disk than in installations or audio-visual mass media. Thus, the user acquires a more prominent status, as co-author.

2. An interactive approach is more complex for a “support” disk than in installation. The approaches also differ in nature. In traditional arts, to contemplate requires a certain immobility of the viewer, or in Louis Lavelle’s words “I must cease action if I want to contemplate” (1921). The paradigm of interactivity in digital system entails direct actions from the part of the user both physical (movements, touch) and, especially, intellectual, upon a discursive structure proposal by the author.

3. The opportunity of altering the work by recycling it as work in progress; the user enjoys the same right, if creative and competent in computers.

4. Accessing through “reading” allows, among other things, the acquisition of the disk, also, one can come back to it any he / she wishes. Furthermore, one can even swap disks, which is virtually impossible for installations.

5. There are themes, topics and creative genres which are better suited for hypermedia configuration on cd-roms, such as, **essays of digital art** or “hyper-essays”. This model is understood as commentary on the trajectory of a validated work of art or of a fragment of it, a fragment of great interest like, for instance “the yellow spot on the wall” in Vermeer’s work (View from Delft). This fragment can be approached from a multitude of perspectives, including the one which relates Proust to Elstir and Bergotte. There is an infinite potential.

6. To “digitalize enunciation” (Deleuze, 1985) is to fulfill an old dream: that of formalising artistic discourse, the way E.A. Poe conceived it: “representations of hallucinatory visions, rigorously controlled in form.” (1848)

7. A pixel as a minimal entity endowed with creative powers – the eighth “qualia sensibles” (1947) in Souriau’s system and a computer as a new “machine to produce stupefying images” (Kircher) should have **a muse**... This muse seems to be the **chimera** defined by Descartes as “an unreal being made up of parts of real beings.” In other words, the constructed digital objects (like virtually generated objects too) are perceived as “paradoxical beings” (Meinong, 1904), “beings without country” (Heimatlos), without a referential universe, which is quite relevant. It is what psychopathology applied to creation calls “agglutination” whereas associative psychology calls it “synectic”, both terms being complex synonyms of the word chimera.

8. After digital objects have been constructed, the most difficult problem follows: their display in a coherent artistic discourse, which should be both fictitious and narrative. The crisis is resolved when we apply the creative ability of the **hypertextual method** to produce non-linear narrations with multiple possibilities to combin and interchange. If a

digital installation may be compared with a Wundercamern, then a cd-rom may be seen as a sort of “Wunderblock” (Freud, 1900), whose potential to “freely associate” narrative nuclei is unlimited.

9. It is no use to panic at Nicholas Negroponte’s shocking statement according to which “interactive multimedia allows little imagination” (1995). This statement reminds me of the “brain-dozing” applied by Leroi – Gourhan to cinema and television public. Contemporary creators of hypermedia discursive works have not fallen into the narrative trap of computer games, as they have understood that less plot, fewer characters, and a more minimal scenographic cronotrop can offer more opportunities for users to put their imaginative abilities to a try.

10. All the above arguments entail a new regime of digital perception, the so – called “cyberception” (Roy Ascott, 1996) which combines Seeing and Being. It would be also possible to say that the new regime of digital creation needs a user who has already recycled his computer proficiency.

11. Last but not least, a “support” disk allows transfer to a HTML format, understood as a programming language for the Internet. The reverse transfer is also possible: a work or web pages can be transferred from the Internet to a cd-rom. The reasons may be purely informative and extensive; Timothy Murray speaks about “the extension of rhizomatic frontiers in digital art” (2000). Thus, calin man’s work, “Esoth Eric [off-line|on-line project] can be included in this reversible genre. The work is constructed by means of a delirious imagery structured in non-linear fiction / narration. It can be accessed on cd-rom, as well as on-line; its sinaesthetic effects are similar.

The advantages of cd-rom’s interactive aesthetics when compared with the spectacular aesthetics of installations are after all subjective. Artistic digital practice confirms the autonomous existence of the two creative paradigms. We may witness a sort of aesthetic compromise once **voxels** (tri-dimensional pixels) develop. The pixels, understood, as bidimensional mini-entities will continue to be attached to hypermedia on “support” disk while the voxels with their holographic dimension will become the main protagonists in the discursive structure of installations, a sort of cheerleaders. Artistic practice also reveals that some authors make parallel version of the same work – installation, cd-rom, network, plus the temptation to combine formats and “supports”. Or, the other way around, the tendency to go beyond the notion of “support”, according to which pixels and voxels are freed from the limits of their genres.

The reader / audience may have understood that I am using the term “pixel” as a metonymy of digital / virtual entities whose sex and ability to dream remain a utopian desideratum. Researchers in the domain claim the contrary: this is not utopy and these “Creatures” are endowed with DNA, with chemical receptors, neurons, temporal lobes and many other parameters specific to human brain. If these creatures are capable of reproduction, as some researchers claim, it means that they are sex discriminated and thus they can couple happily ever after... However, no matter how far things may evolve in this field of Artificial Life, there are two psychic processes which are impossible to fabricate: these Creatures cannot dream (the title of my exposé is just a metaphor), and moreover cannot have revelations in the deep meaning of the term. Because, these two processes “occur” in an non-existent place, the erogenous area of the third eye...