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## LEONARDO THINKS

### Opinion: Against Official Contemporary Art, for an Art of the Present

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We would be making a very serious mistake if we thought that there existed only one particular reality. By allowing the invisible to become visible, artists of all times have already shown that beyond the world of appearances there is a multitude of virtual worlds to which the forces of their genius and skill have given shape. In the last 25 years, scientific thinking itself has accustomed us to the idea that any reality is but a skin under which is to be found an endless series of other levels of reality. In fact, the technological instruments we call upon to take over our everyday universe modify our perception of that universe by giving us access to other forms of the real. The propagation among the general public of devices for multi-sensory visualization and interaction will plunge individuals into "virtual" environments that will open up new fields of experimentation for scientists, philosophers and, of course, artists.

#### The New Frontiers Of Virtual Space

The merit of the artist has always been to invite us to look at the world with an eye that is "other," a different, suspicious eye. On one hand, artists make us doubt our more established certainties; on the other hand, they substitute one reality for another by asserting new representational codes. It is clear that today it has become easier for us to accept that any interpretation of the world is directly linked to a given form of knowledge, a given moment, a socio-cultural conditioning upon which mental representations are highly dependent. The status attributed to the notion of "reality" is always defined through determinations linked to a specific moment in history and knowledge. The historical moment is experienced by contemporaries as a sort of impetus, suspended and immobile in time, an illusion of a region of stability that appears as a frozen image. It is often the case that people, in their own time, at their own level, are anchored in knowledge and certainties that only individuals of great stature, such as Galileo, have the impertinence to challenge, even at the risk of losing their lives.

Since the appearance of Cro-Magnon man in the development of the human adventure, we have gone through successive "virtualities," which then turned into concrete "realities." What may be a new development beginning with the



invention of the wheel-and notably augmented by the multiplying use of electrical and computing machines-is the acceleration of the means of movement to such a degree that it has begun to make visible the movement itself. The frozen image of knowledge (and it was perceived as such) was nothing but a delusion inherent in the limits of our perceptions. Electronic machines offer other possible means of evaluating the real and thus modify our mental structures.

The synthetic image changes our relation to the world by giving us the possibility of acting directly upon virtual worlds. In the virtual environments with which we have experimented thus far, the feeling of physical movement is produced by two sensorial stimuli: one of these is based on total stereoscopic vision; the other, on the feeling of muscular correlation. The relationship between the virtual space made up by the synthetic image and the participant's own body is established through cells that create an intimate hybridization between the body and the virtual space in which we are, so to speak, submerged.

The many electronic extensions that allow us to see and touch the immaterial-which is in a way becoming more "real" all the time-construct a new space around us. In this space, artistic practice will be able to experiment with a new field to produce the new models that are always necessary for a renewal of aesthetic pleasure. The concept of space, once thought to be self-evident, is being transformed and enriched by aspects previously unimagined. The communication space in which we now live on a daily basis is no longer the classic space with which we were previously experimenting, but rather a hybrid, a symbolic form whose representation evades conventional criteria. The multiplication of the means of communication within our environment places us in an informal frame that marks out a virtual space with abstract frontiers. It is the manifestation of this new space, and experimentation with it, that the artists of the *Esthetique de la communication* movement [1], breaking with visual tradition, are trying to bring to our sensibilities and consciousness.

Tangible changes in our perception and our relationship to the world proceed from the change in our concept of space and affect our most commonplace behavior. They require specific systems of representation and bear witness to the birth of an aesthetic that is "other," in which the notion of *relationship* takes precedence over the concept of *object*, and whose horizon lies beyond the visible.

The representations that the artists of *lEsthetique de la communication* are trying to "figure" take root beyond the immediately perceptible real, beyond appearances, beyond the usual frames of perception [2]. Technology and its instruments introduce us to a "grasp" of the world in which the eye as a reference point loses its meaning and is replaced by electronic evaluation sources. Computer-generated and videographic representations replace the materiality of distance with so much force that they are on the point of simply dissolving the referent. In the present state of things, between those representation systems already belonging to the past and those taking their place, it is necessary to find a compromise. Confronted with the complexity of the induced operations, we often have to delegate to the machine the responsibility for dealing with this situation.



Traditional representation is replaced by an intermediate approach through which we enter directly into the era of simulation. In this context, our bodies, joining up with the most ancient myths, can explore space in the form of an intimate experience that breaks down all the constraints of our physical limitations. Thus, the notions of space that have been ours since childhood are implicated in a fundamental way, and this is how we may discover new potentialities, with immense consequences. It is not so much that it is becoming difficult to differentiate between the true and the false, reality and virtuality, but simply that these notions are approaching equivalence.

### **The Artistic Challenge**

It remains for artists, confronted with the immense field opened for them by new technologies, to resist the seduction of facile effects. It still rests with them, as in the past, to continue producing the *symbolic*, the *imaginary*, and the *hedonistic*. Of course they may cross the border and go over to the other side! In doing this, they would be able to pursue their practice and produce fascinating work, but they would henceforth be somewhere else. They would be, for some people, outside the field of art, which would then have to be redefined. And why not? To each his choice. This is not simply a question of terminology-it is strictly a personal matter. The protagonists of *l'Esthetique de la communication* have chosen their side. They are working on the extraordinary possibilities offered by new technologies and are using these possibilities to create a new type of artistic experience adapted to contemporary sensibilities. As Mario Costa has written in his most recent book, *Le Sublime technologique* [3], *l'Esthetique de la communication* neither produces objects nor works on forms: it thematizes space-time.

In a general sense, what the communication artist attempts to express through these actions is the fact that we are situated in the center of a global information process whose complicated functioning places human beings in a completely new position where we must necessarily invent new forms of regulation with regard to our surroundings and the representational models of a reality in constant crisis. The aim of communication artists is to help us understand to what extent the whole field of the sensible has been affected and how these new "forms of feeling" open up new aesthetic paths.

### **For An Art Of Today**

I cannot let this occasion go by without stigmatizing contemporary art, which is slowly falling into disrepute, made banal by the market and strongly supported, in a quasi-exclusive way, by international institutions [4]. This "official" contemporary art has now become purely academic and formal, concerning a micro-milieu of operators and consumers in the world at large. It is a sort of exclusive club, dramatically cut off from the public and from the advances of research in science, which are confronting humanity with fundamental questions. The artists of this *fin de sicle* find themselves at a turning point in the history of our civilization, a point at which categories, including those of art, will have to be rethought and read in new ways. The end of linear thinking and the generalization of multimedia have led to "complexity" and the end of narration in art. Without transition, we are flung from "representation" to "presentation," from "appearance" to "apparition."



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This means that what is to be fixed is no longer the gesture, the object or the image, but rather the *transformation process*, which must be drawn upon as it flows back and forth.

This means that the status of the artist slides in a significant way from the position of observer to that of "acting" agent whose action transforms our perception of the milieu in which we are immersed. The Impressionists taught us to "see" and "feel" the landscape; the artist of today teaches us to become conscious of our technological context. We are no longer in a classical art problematic, that of the *contemplation of appearances*, but in a dynamic of how things emerge! This, in particular, is the meaning induced by artists who maintain an interactive practice involving networks, where the very notion of author has become questionable.

With knowledge increasing at its current pace, art cannot continue to live on the gains of a bygone past. We are confronted with new ways of grasping space. Art has suddenly shown that it has become an *inventive adaptation tool*, capable of tackling the totally new situation with which humanity is confronted.

Our relationship with the world will never be the same again, now that techniques such as digitization, artificial intelligence, artificial life and the communications revolution have thrust themselves into our lives. It is for artists, each in his or her own way, to reformulate the eternal questions and to draw forth the necessary lessons.



## Endnotes

[1] An art group/movement founded by Mario Costa (Professor of History of Aesthetics, University of Salerno [Italy]) and Fred Forest in 1983.

[2] See, for example *Opus International*, No. 94 (Paris, 1984); Fred Forest, doctoral thesis, Sorbonne, Paris, 1985; "Plus ou Moins Zero," manifesto of l'Esthetique de la Communication, No. 43 (Brussels, 1985); "Dossier l'Esthetique de la Communication," *Art Press* No. 122 (Paris, 1988).

[3] M. Costa, *Le Sublime technologique* (Naples: Edisud, 1990); see also "Dossier Art et technique contemporains," *Quaderni* No. 21 (Autumn 1993), Departement des Sciences Politiques, Sorbonne, Paris.

[4] Fred Forest, "Pour qui sonne le glas ou les impostures de l'art contemporain," in "Dossier Art et technique contemporains"

Bio: Fred Forest is a French new media artist. More information about his work is available at <http://www.fredforest.org/>