

# Giving Form: Some Thoughts On Network Installations In the Age of Virtual Republishing

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The German artist Kurt Schwitters, whose views of art and what it was like being an artist were eventually developed into a creative methodology he would come to refer to exclusively as "Merz," envisioned an aesthetic practice where "the material is as unessential as myself. The only essential thing is giving form. Because giving form is unessential, I use any material the picture demands." He believed that by harmonizing different types of materials among themselves, that an artist could move beyond what was for him, in 1920, "mere oil painting."

Along with other early 20th century artists like Marcel Duchamp, Jean Tinguely and the Italian Futurists led by Marinetti, Schwitters took the realm of visual art to what we would now have to call a hyperbolic level of abstraction, one that would reinvestigate the complex nature of creating unusual forms out of the detritus of what was then the beating heart of a technologically-enhanced industrial culture. When one looks back at his Merz architecture, for example, or Tinguely's self-destructing machines, Marinetti's typographical pyrotechnics, and Duchamp's appropriation of readymade objects awaiting the individual artist's instinctive selection and pseudonymous signature, we are reminded of how odd it must have seemed to the average spectator or reader of that day.

And yet since so much of our mainstream and alternative art today is being developed with software application programs that encourage the liberal usage of these same modernistic devices (particularly sampling, collage, technological gimmickry and other "engineered" behaviors), we tend to forget that what we are doing is not necessarily all that new and that if we're looking for deep structural changes in the art work of today as opposed to even ten or twenty years ago, then we're more likely to find these changes in **the mediums through which contemporary art gets distributed** and how the emerging network culture radically transforms the way in which we participate in the dual worlds of art-making and art-appreciating. We might go so far as to say that the contemporary art landscape, once confined exclusively to the continuous exhibition of various art works and installations in physical space, is now evolving its cultural imprint on the screenal spaces connected to one another on the Internet.

This brings up one of the major issues that I have been investigating in my research and development of the GRAMMATRON hypermedia project at Brown University in conjunction with both their Graduate Creative Writing Program and Computer Science Laboratory of Scientific Visualization, that is, once an artist installs a hypermedia narrative environment on the World Wide Web, what happens to the dominant publishing and exhibition models bound by physical objects in physical spaces? I have already outlined in my [Avant-Pop manifesto](#) and previous Amerika Online columns how the distribution model offered by the network-publishing paradigm radically alters the way we'll create and disseminate texts in the near future (and, speaking for myself, I think it's safe to say that I am now actively engaged in a full-time electronic writing and publishing practice).

The problem I am perceiving with the dominant exhibition model that still drives the visual arts world can be best expressed by having you imagine a gallery director or museum curator putting a printed literary novel of say, 300 pages, in an institutionally-supported gallery or museum space and then inviting the patron to get lost in the dynamic aesthetic environment that unravels within its pages. Most art-appreciators would have a problem with this, for who has the time to sit or, worse yet, stand, in such a space and read an entire novel. Even if the work were a kind of narrative art consciously moving beyond literature and presenting itself on a computer screen as an elaborate hypermedia construction yet still located in the same institutionalized, physical space, how long would the art-appreciator stay with the complex narrative system before shifting into another room with more stable objects?

One of the alternatives that the GRAMMATRON project intends to explore is what I have previously called in my

[Hypertextual Consciousness](#) theory-web "Creative Exhibitionism," a situation where the complex narrative art system is being exhibited in a virtual space as a network installation that the interactive-participant can continually come back to and that is linked with live presentations/performances by the artist in physical spaces as well as print objects (I am finishing a long "white paper" called **Work In Progress: The Making of GRAMMATRON**, excerpts of which will be appearing in print publications as well as my Web Art Criticism column for the German journal [Telepolis](#)).

Back in 1993, when I was composing my Avant-Pop manifesto in which I acknowledged the contemporary digital artist's dual lineage to both the avant-garde art and writing movements of the early parts of this century and the wild explosion of electronic pop culture in the latter part of the century, I asked this important question: "What would the Futurists do with an information superhighway?"

I asked the question in a rhetorical way, that is, I assumed that the Futurists and other artists such as the Dadaists and certainly the Situationists, would have immediately begun experimenting with whatever forms of expression the new media offered. They would have, as software engineers like to say, "pushed the envelope," both technologically and conceptually. Today though I'm asking a different question: "How are the artists of our time going to respond to the rapidly changing aesthetic, political and economic realities presented to our contemporary society with the advent of global computer networking systems and the growing multi-national, mass-media, Dreamworks complex?"

Perhaps the best way to respond to the previous question is to build alternative sites that actively resist the temptation to become absorbed into the cultural mainstream. But then other questions are bound to issue forth, such as "will all hypermedia narrative projects, no matter how politically-correct their content may think itself to be, endorse the development of commercial products emerging out of the new media industry?" This is a significant query to ask oneself when composing in this environment, for if the political strategy behind the narrative composition of hypermedia projects like GRAMMATRON, is at all serious about employing the Avant-Pop anti-aesthetic practice to produce new, unpackageable culture integrations that go against the grain of the efficiency oriented profit system by reintroducing disruptive forces that the system needs to exclude, then how can one proceed to compose these "subversive narratives" without simultaneously supporting the system of investments and expenditures that drive the technological apparatus through its various stages of development in late-capitalism?

As art becomes less art, it takes on rhetoric's early role as persuasive critique of everyday life. As a result of this movement out of art and back into everyday life, art itself becomes integrated into the workings of everyday life by situating itself in corporations, universities, governments and, more importantly, the fluid vistas of the vast electrosphere where all of these "cultures" collide and mix.

But what **is** a work of art in the age of virtual republishing and network installation? In the rhizomatic flow of network cultures, the eye touches rather than sees. It immerses itself in the tactile sense it feels when caught in the heat of the meaning-making process. This meaning-making process, which manifests itself as kind of electronic media event one is responsible for having created themselves as a result of having become a cyborg-narrator or avatar-presence in the simulated worlds of cyberspace, is actually part of a greater desire to become part of a socio-cultural mosaic.

And yet what is the source code that inscribes this desire toward an engagement with the literary production of our time?

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