

Art as interactive communications: networking global culture

In the relatively short period since 1994, technological conditions brought about by the Internet have transformed everyday life with increasing intensity and significance. An entire parallel virtual world has been invented and constructed online [...]

Writing in the historical context of the 1930s – a time of technological revolution and economic depression with war looming ahead – Walter Benjamin addressed the issues surrounding the relationship between the arts and technology from a vantage point in time that is in some ways reminiscent of our own. His essays in many ways still feel surprisingly up to date, thanks not only to parallels between mechanical and digital reproduction but also to the historical context, which begged to reconsider possible connections between cultural production and technology. In his essay “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin described the major recasting of artistic forms that were beginning to take place: authorial roles were challenged while social function was emphasized. He urged artists to be aware of the potential of new technologies and to position themselves not only in terms of their responsibility to a wide public but also with regard to their power to create meaningful work that could reverberate within society (although he was also fearful of the fascistic impulse in the use of technology). He posed the questions: What is the relation of a work to the modes of production of its time? What is its position in them? Does it merely supply a system that already exists without changing or transforming it? Benjamin asks those using new technologies to choose a production medium that induces others to participate: “this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is, . . . spectators into collaborators” (p. 222). Benjamin was already aware of the changing distinctions between the author and artist and of the role of participants as producers of potential forms of personal agency. [...]



Figure 6.1.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4*, 1999–2002, eighteen robotic xenon searchlights controlled over the Internet. 3-D Java interface.

The historic center of Mexico City, the most populous city in the world, was transformed through the use of xenon arc robotic searchlights controlled over the Internet. By ensuring that public participation was an integral part of this large-scale interactive installation, the artist attempted to establish new creative relationships between control technologies, urban landscapes, and both a local and a remote public. Visitors to the project website could design ephemeral light structures which played out over the National Palace, City Hall, the Cathedral, and the Templo Mayor Aztec ruins. These could be seen from a ten-mile radius and were rendered in the numbered sequence of their creation on the Internet. Every six seconds the searchlights would automatically re-orient themselves and three webcams would document a participant's design. These were archived with commentaries, information, and photos of their design. An e-mail message confirmed for each participant when their archive page was completed.

(Rafael Lozano-Hemmer; Photo: Martin Vargas)