

## Art & the Network Why MARCEL?

Art has been migrating to the network ever since it began, my own first experience dating from 1981. Today many artists are already active in the network space and a very dispersed artistic presence exists and has existed for several years. Bandwidth has improved and has become readily available meaning that more elaborate artistic experimentation with even less expensive connections is now possible.

In that light, why MARCEL? At its inception, MARCEL was an original idea which was meant to bring attention to the importance of art and artists being present in what was becoming the new communication space. It was a mobilizing idea for raising consciousness about the importance of the artistic dimension of communication and communication technology and the social sphere in general, particularly when confronted by new tools, processes and procedures. The question is whether such a mobilising idea and the effort behind it is still necessary.

I feel quite certain that it is. Even though there is a massive amount of art – not all good or interesting – operating over the network, it is scattered throughout the network space and lacks an identity giving it any force or influence vis-à-vis society as a whole. It lacks an immediately identifiable presence giving it the necessary weight to affect the functioning of the network in a direction useful to art. Not everyone in art has to be part of that movement but a critical mass is essential to create a visible space where art can function and where artistic concerns can be addressed.

Institutions today, particularly those involved in art, education and culture, cannot ignore the network. It is becoming more and more the dominant technological manifestation of our society's communication space where those efforts will increasingly take place and be transmitted and exchanged. Not being present in it will make their efforts incrementally irrelevant just as those cities which declined and were bypassed by the railroad saw their importance subside. For those institutions to remain effective a strong network presence and operation is crucial, meaning that time, effort and resources must be directed to it. The network dimension must be integrated into their programmes and their members made aware of the necessity to operate within it.

The experimentation that has been going on in multicasting is a case in point. Access Grid, the most prevalent platform that exists for it, has been used by artists for many years. While artists are good at dealing with the imperfections of any technological system, often turning them to their advantage, Access Grid because of its limitations has disillusioned many artists after initially trying to work with it. That has been because that platform has not been evolving in a way that artists can appreciate let alone participate in. The conclusion is that there is still not a multicasting platform that functions well for art and the technological sector is not about to build one.

Artists must take that in hand. Thus the need for coordinated cross-disciplinary working groups addressing such developmental questions in the context of art.

One of the interesting yet frustrating aspects of the network and its development is the fact that many people around the world are working on the same thing. For example, hundreds of people are working on archives of past work and many of them are developing incompatible systems, tools and procedures duplicating what is happening elsewhere. That energy could be better channelled and directed through collaboration and the results more spectacular and efficient with a greater impact on the operation of the network. The combined efforts of artists would have a greater say on how the network evolves.

Another compelling reason for artists to act together is that Internet is moving in the direction of other 20th century media in that it is becoming more and more driven by advertising. This will mean the decisions concerning the future of the network will be made to accommodate that activity to the detriment of person to person communication and the founding ideal of Internet and the Web. An effort must be made to preserve at least parts of the network space for art, culture and education. Artists must have a network identity to participate in that demand and to assure that they have an open space where experimentation can continue.

The need for services for the arts over the network is enormous and cannot be addressed by one or two institutions. This again should be a joint effort with several partners working in small teams to develop functions, as well as data bases, which best meet their needs but which can be shared with others. The sum of that activity would definitely be greater than the parts and it should have a central point where those efforts could be easily identified and communicated.

Art in most developed countries is funded by national governments. Art over the network is international and does not easily fall into a category recognised by most government funders. An internationally recognised art effort can address this problem more easily than individual artists or arts organisations. By the same token, success by one member in one country becomes a precedent for others in other countries, which can be used to move funding organisations to recognise the importance of one or another activity. This was one of the founding ideas behind MARCEL, to be able to building on each others' successes as a way of moving forward in what was then a vacuum. An example is the success members have had in bringing the operators of the academic network in the UK to recognise the validity of having artists-run centers as part of the academic network. That precedent could be useful to artists elsewhere. Other examples exist.

Much of the content over the web comes with little or no evaluation. Value judgements are suspended as everyone scrambles to be present in network space. "Gate Keepers" are rare and there is a growing awareness of the need for weighing content, recommending some things over others. This again should be a joint venture directed by the participants themselves as those most concerned by the communication of art. And this before it becomes another

commercial exercise functioning uniquely through the operation of the market where the incentive to doing anything useful is replaced by the drive to make money.

MARCEL is also an experiment in self-organization, a totally lateral organization with no central governing institution. There are project coordinators, managers, heads of working groups, etc., but no CEO making the big decisions. I have acted as a kind of international coordinator to get the network started, but am moving more and more into the background as aspects of the network take on a life of their own. Most coming together on the web consists of groups of unassociated people connecting to express their self, more often their ego. Very little collaboration happens and most communication is one-way only.

MARCEL is based on collaboration in virtual space and could be seen as a prototype of a new horizontal organizational structure including multiple independent parallel projects. It is made up of independently collaborating smaller structures, working groups, web managers, which, in the long run will make up its overall operation – networks within networks within networks. Whether it will work is too early to tell. That will be the test of its third five-year plan which is where the project is at this point in time.

One of the interesting aspects of this formulation is that it is being built principally by artists or people aligned with art. As the artist Robert Irwin describe it, “perception is the subject of art”, and “art exists not in objects but as a way of seeing”. The process of communication is implicit in art. This brings to network development a different modus operandi, one closely related to the traditional role of art, communicating the results of a personal interaction with one’s environment in an aesthetic manner through mastering certain tools of communication. Artistic collaboration around that goal has always existed and bringing it into virtual space is a nature step. Facets of a new Reality are to be found in the compilation of those efforts demonstrating why the physicist John Wheeler defined “Meaning - objective reality - as the joint product of those who communicate.”

In sum, art still needs an identifiable territory in the virtual space of the network. It is, at this point, a very indeterminate space with a geography very different from the geographies of the past. It will not be hierarchical – a pyramid – or any of the many forms currently proposed. It will require new not yet defined roles, new professions in the arts, new arts institutions as well as new functions and possibilities for individual artists. Its shape is to be determined by its activities responding to the demands of artists and their collaborators. We will know its form by building it. “C’est en forgeant qu’on devient forgeron,” – by smithing, one become a smith.