

POLITICS AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA ART (1985)

by Lynn Heshman Leeson

First published in Journal of Contemporary Studies, San Francisco, California, 1985

Technological innovation is manifestly altering the terms of social dialogue and political debate and radically decentralizing communication. This is particularly true in authoritarian systems, which rely on centralized control of communications to maintain their political control. The infiltration of personal computers into Eastern Europe, for example, is obstructing if not virtually nullifying efforts by the totalitarian regimes to control access to information. The consequent erosion of political authority is becoming increasingly evident. These mass movements have found dynamic opportunities for analysis and transmission of “freedom’s raw material”, or, “information”.

The decentralization of information empowers marginal groups. There are, consequently, vast implications for how individuals conceive their roles in society. This more fundamental, individual change will occur as technological invention alters the very bases for exchange of information, the conditions of definition for the person who expresses his or her self, as well as for the audience and will be extremely subversive to all forms of traditional political, social and religious authority.

Interactive technology and art

The art world has long functioned on the presumption that viewing art is passive, while only making art is active. Technological change in the form of laser and video art, however, is changing this traditional way of viewing art. “Interactive technologies,” require user/participants in order to function. Rather than offering pre-sequenced narrative information to a passive viewer, interactive media insists upon an active choice by its observers. Both function together, as a unit, as a cyborg. Interactive technology thus represents the antithesis of communication, as we have known it.

The tendency to speed up the pace of events and force them on the private lives of people is evident in television’s understandable instinct for focusing on dramatic, visual events. This instinct, driven by the commercial drive to maximize viewer audiences, is evident in its most extreme form in relation to reporting new about wars. Victims of war become victims of media. Note that Marey invented a camera that looked like a rifle when he was developing Chromo photography. His gun was modeled after the Colt and allowed him to shoot and capture images of birds.

The very act of viewing an image creates a distance from the original event. The captured image in a photograph, film, or tape is a relic of the past. Life is a moving target: any object or event that becomes

isolated becomes history. Information becomes “redesigned” to displace the direct contact of a viewer by replacing his or her vantage point with the frame provided by a cameraman/journalist/photographer. The direction in which information is edited beyond an individual’s control separates one from the event or image referred to, resulting in a diminished sense of identity.

Laser/video art, and particularly interactive media, represents a major step toward this breaking down of traditional barriers. Some may view this with dismay but few can argue its inevitability. The technological dimension of this revolution will probably precede its spiritual emergence, but the reformulation of fundamental human dialogue has clearly already begun. As the new range of options made possible by the interactive media technology becomes increasingly visible in areas of society outside of the narrow confines of the art world, the political impact will become spectacular. While many people alienated from traditional forms of authority may celebrate this development, its ultimate value will become substantiated by the increased personal participation.