

Utopian Promises - Net Realities

Critical Art Ensemble

The need for net criticism certainly is a matter of overwhelming urgency. While a number of critics have approached the new world of computerized communications with a healthy amount of skepticism, their message has been lost in the noise and spectacle of corporate hype-the unstoppable tidal wave of seduction has enveloped so many in its dynamic utopian beauty that little time for careful reflection is left. Indeed, a glimpse of a possibility for a better future may be contained in the new techno-apparatus, and perhaps it is best to acknowledge these possibilities here in the beginning, since Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) has no desire to take the position of the neoluddites who believe that the techno-apparatus should be rejected outright, if not destroyed. To be sure, computerized communications offer the possibility for the enhanced storage, retrieval, and exchange of information for those who have access to the necessary hardware, software, and technical skills. In turn, this increases the possibility for greater access to vital information, faster exchange of information, enhanced distribution of information, and cross cultural artistic and critical collaborations. The potential humanitarian benefits of electronic systems are undeniable; however, CAE questions whether the electronic apparatus is being used for these purposes in the representative case, much as we question the political policies which guide the net's development and accessibility.

This is not the first time that the promise of electronic utopia has been offered. One need only look back at Brecht's critique of radio to find reason for concern when such promises are resurrected. While Brecht recognized radio's potential for distributing information for humanitarian and cultural purposes, he was not surprised to see radio being used for the very opposite. Nor should we be surprised that his calls for a more democratic interactive medium went unheeded.

During the early 1970s, there was a brief euphoric moment during the video revolution when some believed that Brecht's call for an interactive and democratic electronic medium was about to be answered. The development of home video equipment led to a belief that soon everyone who desired to would be able to manufacture their own television. This seemed to be a real possibility. As the cost of video equipment began to drop dramatically, and cable set-ups offered possibilities for distribution, electronic utopia seemed immanent, and yet, the home video studio never came to be. Walls and boundaries confounding this utopian dream seemed to appear out of nowhere. For instance, in the US, standards for broadcast quality required postproduction equipment that no one could access or afford except capital-saturated media companies. Most cable channels remained in the control of corporate media, and the few public access channels fell into the hands of censors who cited "community standards" as their reason for an orderly broadcast system. While production equipment did get distributed as promised, the hopes of the video utopianists were crushed at the distribution level. Corporate goals for establishing a new market for electronic hardware were met, but the means for democratic cultural production never appeared.

Now that giddy euphoria is back again, arising in the wake of the personal computer revolution of the early 80s, and with the completion of a "world-wide" multi-directional distribution network. As to be expected, utopian promises from the corporate spectacle machine drown the everyday lives of bureaucrats and technocrats around the first world, and once again there seems to be a general belief-at least within technically adept populations-that this time the situation will be different. And to a degree, this situation is different. There is an electronic free zone, but from CAE's perspective, it is only a modest development at best. By far the most significant use of the electronic apparatus is to keep order, to replicate dominant pancapitalist ideology, and to develop new markets.

At the risk of redundantly stating the obvious, CAE would like to recall the origins of the internet. The internet is war-tech that was designed as an analog to the US highway system (Yet another product which stemmed from the mind of the military, and which was primarily intended as a decentralized aid to mobilization). The US military wanted an apparatus that would preserve command structure in the case of nuclear attack. The answer was an electronic web capable of immediately rerouting itself if one or more links were destroyed, thus allowing surviving authorities to remain in communication with each other and to act accordingly. With such an apparatus in place, military authority could be maintained, even through the worst of catastrophes. With such planning at the root of the internet, suspicion about its alleged anti-authoritarian characteristics must occur to anyone who takes the time to reflect on the apparatus. It should also be noted that the decentralized characteristics for which so many praise the net did not arise out of anarchist intention, but out of nomadic military strategy.

Research scientists were the next group to go on-line after the military. While it would be nice to believe that their efforts on the net were benign, one must question why they were given access to the apparatus in the first place. Science has always claimed legitimacy by announcing its "value-free" intentions to search for the truth of the material world; however, this search costs money, and hence a political economy with a direct and powerful impact on science's lofty goals of value-free research enters the equation. Do investors in scientific research offer money with no restrictions attached? This seems quite unlikely. Some type of return on the investment is implicit in any demand from funding institutions. In the US, the typical demand is either theory or technology with military applications or applications that will strengthen economic development. The greater the results promised by science in terms of these two categories, the more generous the funding. In the US, not even scientists get something for nothing.

The need for greater efficiency in research and development opened the new communication systems to academics, and with that development, a necessary degree of disorder was introduced into the apparatus. Elements of free zone information exchange began to appear. But as this system developed, other investors, most notably the corporations, demanded their slice of the electronic pie. All kinds of financial business were conducted on the net with relatively secure efficiency. As the free zone began to grow, the corporations realized that a new market mechanism was growing with it, and eventually the marketeers were released onto the net. At this point, a peculiar paradox came into being: Free market capitalism came into conflict with the conservative desire for order. It became apparent that for this new market possibility to reach its full potential, authorities would have to tolerate a degree of chaos. This was necessary to seduce the wealthier classes into using the net as site of consumption and entertainment, and second, to offer the net as an alibi for the illusion of social freedom. Although totalizing control of communications was lost, the overall cost of this development to governments and corporations was minimal, and in actuality, the cost was nothing compared to what was gained.

Thus was born the most successful repressive apparatus of all time; and yet it was (and still is) successfully represented under the sign of liberation. What is even more frightening is that the corporation's best allies in maintaining the gleaming utopian surface of cyberspace are some of the very populations who should know better. Techno-utopianists have accepted the corporate hype, and are now disseminating it as the reality of the net. This regrettable alliance between the elite virtual class and new age cybernauts is structured around five key virtual promises. These are the promised social changes that seem as if they will occur at any moment, but never actually come into being.

Promise One: The New Body

Those of us familiar with discourse on cyberspace and virtual reality have heard this promise over and over again, and in fact there is a kernel of truth associated with it. The virtual body is a body of great potential. On this body we can reinscribe ourselves using whatever coding system we desire. We can try on new body configurations. We can experiment with immortality by going places and doing things that would be impossible in the physical world. For the virtual body, nothing is fixed and everything is possible. Indeed, this is the reason why hackers wish to become disembodied consciousnesses flowing freely through cyberspace, willing the idea of their own bodies and environments. As virtual reality improves with new generations of computer technology, perhaps this promise will come to pass in the realm of the multi-sensual; however, it is currently limited to gender reassignment on chat lines, or game boy flight simulators.

What did this allegedly liberated body cost? Payment was taken in the form of a loss of individual sovereignty, not just from those who use the net, but from all people in technologically saturated societies. With the virtual body came its fascist sibling, the data body-a much more highly developed virtual form, and one that exists in complete service to the corporate and police state. The data body is the total collection of files connected to an individual. The data body has always existed in an immature form since the dawn of civilization. Authority has always kept records on its underlings. Indeed, some of the earliest records that Egyptologists have found are tax records. What brought the data body to maturity is the technological apparatus. With its immense storage capacity and its mechanisms for quickly ordering and retrieving information, no detail of social life is too insignificant to record and to scrutinize. From the moment we are born and our birth certificate goes on-line, until the day we die and our death certificate goes on-line, the trajectory of our individual lives is recorded in scrupulous detail. Education files, insurance files, tax files, communication files, consumption files, medical files, travel files, criminal files, investment files, files into infinity....

The data body has two primary functions. The first purpose serves the repressive apparatus; the second serves the marketing apparatus. The desire of authoritarian power to make the lives of its subordinates perfectly transparent achieves satisfaction through the data body. Everyone is under permanent surveillance by virtue of their necessary interaction with the marketplace. Just how detailed data body information actually may be is a matter of speculation, but we can be certain that it is more detailed than we would like it to be, or care to think.

The second function of the data body is to give marketeers more accurate demographic information to design and create target populations. Since pancapitalism has long left the problem of production behind, moving from an economy of need to an economy of desire, marketeers have developed better methods to artificially create desires for products that are not needed. The data body gives them insights into consumption patterns, spending power, and "lifestyle choices" of those with surplus income. The data body helps marketeers to find you, and provide for your lifestyle. The postmodern slogan, "You don't pick the commodity; the commodity picks you" has more meaning than ever. But the most frightening thing about the data body is that it is the center of an individual's social being. It tells the members of officialdom what our cultural identities and roles are. We are powerless to contradict the data body. Its word is the law. One's organic being is no longer a determining factor, from the point of view of corporate and government bureaucracies. Data has become the center of social culture, and our organic flesh is nothing more than a counterfeit representation of original data.

Promise 2: Convenience

Earlier this century, the great sociologist Max Weber explained why bureaucracies work so well as a means of rationalized social organization in complex society. In comparing bureaucratic practice to his ideal-type, only one flaw appears: Humans provide the labor for these institutions. Unfortunately humans have nonrational characteristics, the most notorious of which is the expression of desire. Rather than working at optimum efficiency, organic units are likely to seek out that which gives them pleasure in ways that are contrary to the instrumental aims of the bureaucracy. All varieties of creative slacking are employed by organic units These range from work slowdowns to unnecessary chit-chat with one's fellow employees. Throughout this century policy makers and managerial classes have concerned themselves with developing a way to stop such activities in order to maximize and intensify labor output.

The model for labor intensification came with the invention of the robot. So long as the robot is functional, it never strays from its task. Completely replacing humans with robots is not possible, since so far, they are only capable of simple, albeit precise, mechanical tasks. They are data driven, as opposed to the human capacity for concept recognition. The question then becomes how to make humans more like robots, or to update the discourse, more like cyborgs. At present, much of the technology necessary to accomplish this goal is available, and more is in development. However, having the technology, such as telephone headsets or wearable computers, is not enough. People must be seduced into wanting to wear them, at least until the technology evolves that can be permanently fixed to their bodies.

The means of seduction? Convenience. Life will be so much easier if we only connect to the machine. As usual there is a grain of truth to this idea. I can honestly admit that my life has been made easier since I began using a computer, but only in a certain sense. As a writer, it is easier for me to finish a paper now than it was when I used pen and paper or a typewriter. The problem: Now I am able to (and therefore, must) write two papers in the time it used to take to produce one. The implied promise that I will have more free time because I use a computer is false.

Labor intensification through time management is only the beginning, as there is another problem in regard to total utility. People can still separate themselves from their work stations-the true home of the modern day cyborg. The seduction continues, persuading us that we should desire to carry our electronic extensions with us all the time. The latest commercials from AT&T are the perfect representation of consumer seduction. They promise: Have you ever sent a fax....from the beach? You will." or "Have you ever received a phone call....on your wrist? You will." This commercial is most amusing. There is an image of a young man who has just finished climbing a mountain and is watching a sunset. At that moment his wife calls on his wrist phone, and he describes the magnificence of the sunset to her. Now who is kidding who. Is your wife going to call you while you are mountain climbing? Are you going to need to send a fax while lounging on the beach? The corporate intention for deploying this technology (in addition to profit) is so transparent, it's painful. The only possible rejoinder is: "Have you ever been at a work station....24 hours a day, 365 days a year? You will." Now the sweat shop can go any where you do!

Another telling element in this representation is that the men in these commercials are always alone. (This is a gendered element which CAE is sure has not failed to catch the attention of feminists, although CAE is unsure as to whether it will be interpreted as sexism or a stroke of luck). In this sense, the problem is doubled: Not only is the work station always with you, but social interaction will always be fully mediated by technology. This is the perfect solution to abolish that nuisance, the subversive environment of public space.

Promise 3: Community

Currently in the US, there is no more popular buzz word than "community." This word is so empty of meaning that it can be used to describe almost any social manifestation. For the most part, it is used to connote sympathy with or identification with a particular social aggregate. In this sense, one hears of the gay community or the African-American community. There are even oxymorons, such as the international community. Corporate marketeers from IBM to Microsoft have been quick to capitalize on this empty sign as a means to build their commercial campaigns. Recognizing the extreme alienation that afflicts so many under the reign of pancapitalism, they offer net technology as a cure for a feeling of loss that has no referent. Through chat lines, news groups, and other digital environments, nostalgia for a golden age of sociability that never existed is replaced by a new modern day sense of community.

This promise is nothing but aggravating. There is not even a grain of truth in it. If there is any reason for optimism, it is only to the extent mentioned in the beginning of this lecture; that is, the net makes possible a broader spectrum of information exchange. However, anyone with even a basic knowledge of sociology understands that information exchange in no way constitutes a community. Community is a collective of kinship networks which share a common geographic territory, a common history, and a shared value system, one usually rooted in a common religion. Typically, communities are rather homogenous, and tend to exist in the historical context of a simple division of labor. Most importantly, communities embrace nonrational components of life and of consciousness. Social action is not carried out by means of contract, but by understandings, and life is certainly not fully mediated by technology. In this sense, the connection between community and net life is unfathomable. (CAE does not want to romanticize this social form, since communities can be as repressive and/or as pathological as any society).

Use of the net beyond its one necessary use (i.e., information gathering), is, from CAE's perspective, a highly developed anti-social form of interacting. That someone would want to stay in his or her home or office and reject human contact in favor of a textually mediated communication experience can only be a symptom of rising alienation, not a cure for it. Why the repressive apparatus would want this isolation to develop is very clear: If someone is on-line, he or she is off the street and out of the gene pool. In other words, they are well within the limits of control. Why the marketing apparatus would desire such a situation is equally clear: The lonelier people get, the more they will have no choice but to turn to work and to consumption as a means of seeking pleasure.

In a time when public space is diminishing and being replaced by fortified institutions such as malls, theme parks, and other manifestations of forced consumption that pass themselves off as locations for social interaction, shouldn't we be looking for a sense of the social, (that is, to the extent still possible), direct and unmediated, rather than seeing these anti-public spaces replicated in an even more lonely electronic form?

Promise 4: Democracy

Another promise eternally repeated in discourse on cyberspace is the idea that the electronic apparatus will be the zenith of utopian democracy. Certainly, the internet does have some democratic characteristics. It provides all its cyber-citizens with the means to contact all other cyber-citizens. On the net, everyone is equal. The shining emblem of this new democracy is the World Wide Web. People can construct their own home pages, and even more people can access these sites as points of investigation. This is all well and good, but we must ask ourselves if these democratic characteristics actually constitute democracy. A platform for individual voices is not enough (especially in the Web where so many voices are lost in the clutter of data debris). Democracy is dependent on the individual's ability to act on the information received. Unfortunately, even with the net, autonomous action is still as difficult as ever.

The difficulty here is threefold: First, there is the problem of locality and geographic separation. In the case of information gathering, the information is only as useful as the situation and the location of the physical body allows. For example, a gay man who lives in a place where homophobia reigns, or even worse, where homosexual practice is an illegal activity, will still be unable to openly act on his desires, regardless of the information he may gather on the net. He is still just as closeted in his everyday life practice, and is reduced to passive spectatorship in regard to the object of his desire, so long as he remains in a repressive locality.

The second problem is one of institutional oppression. For example, no one can deny that the net can function as a wonderful pedagogical tool and can act as a great means for self education. Unfortunately, the net has very little legitimacy in and of itself as an educational institution. The net must be used in a physical world context under appropriate supervision for it to be awarded legitimacy. In the case of education, in order for the knowledge-value gained from the net to be socially recognized and accepted, it must be used as a tool within the context of a university or a school. These educational contexts are fortified in a manner to maintain a status-quo distribution of education. Consequently, one can acquire a great deal of knowledge from the net, but still have no education capital to be exchanged in the marketplace. All of these cases, there must be a liberated physical environment if the net is to function as a supplement to democratic activity.

The final problem is that the net functions as a disciplinary apparatus through the use of transparency. If people feel that they are under surveillance, they are less likely to act in manner that is beyond normalized activity; that is, they are less likely to express themselves freely, and to otherwise act in manner that could produce political and social changes within their environments. In this sense, the net serves the purpose of negating activity rather than encouraging it. It channels people toward orderly homogeneous activity, rather than reinforcing the acceptance of difference that democratic societies need. To be sure, there are times when transparency can be turned against itself. For example, one of the reasons that the PRI party's counteroffensive against the Zapatistas did not end in total slaughter, was the resisting party's use of the net to keep attention focused upon its members and its cause. By disallowing the secret of massacre, many lives were saved, and the resistant movement could continue. Much the same can be said about the stay of execution won for Mumia Abu Jamal.

The final point here is that it must be remembered that the internet does not exist in a vacuum. It is intimately related to all kinds of social structures and historical dynamics, and hence its democratic structure cannot be realistically analyzed as if it were a closed system.

Taking a step back from the insider's point of view, achieving democracy through the net seems even less likely considering the demographics of the situation. There are five and a half billion people in the world. Over a billion barely keep themselves alive from day to day. Most people don't even have a telephone, and hence it seems very unlikely that they will get a computer, let alone go on-line. This situation raises the question, is the net a means to democracy, or simply another way to divide the world into haves and have-nots? We also must ask ourselves, how many people consider the net really relevant in their everyday lives? While CAE believes that it is safe to assume that the number of net users will grow, it seems unlikely that it will grow to include more than those who have the necessary educational background, and/or those who are employed by bureaucratic and technocratic agencies.

CAE suggests that this elite stronghold will remain so, and that most of the first world population that will become a part of the computer revolution will do so primarily as passive consumers, rather than as active participants. They will be playing computer games, watching interactive TV, and shopping in virtual malls. The stratified distribution of education will act as the guardian of the virtual border between the passive and the active user, and prevent those populations participating in multidirectional interactivity from increasing in any significant numbers.

Promise 5: New Consciousness

Of all the net hype, this promise is perhaps the most insidious, since it seems to have no corporate sponsor (although Microsoft has tapped the trend to some extent). The notion of the new consciousness has emerged out of new age thinking. There is a belief promoted by cyber-gurus (Timothy Leary, Jason Lanier, Roy Ascott, Richard Kriesche, Mark Pesci) [sic] that the net is the apparatus of a benign collective consciousness. It is the brain of the planet which transcends into mind through the activities of its users. It can function as a third eye or sixth sense for those who commune with this global coming together. This way of thinking is the paramount form of ethnocentrism and myopic class perception. As discussed in the last section, the third world and most of the first world citizenry are thoroughly marginalized in this divine plan. If anything, this theory replicates the imperialism of early capitalism, and recalls notions such as manifest destiny. If new consciousness is indicative of anything, it is the new age of imperialism that will be realized through information control (as opposed to the early capital model of military domination). Of the former four promises examined here, each has proven on closer inspection to be a replication of authoritarian ideology to justify and put into action greater repression and oppression. New consciousness is no exception. Even if we accept the good intentions and optimistic hopes of the new age cybernauts, how could anyone conclude that an apparatus emerging out military aggression and corporate predation could possibly function as a new form of terrestrial spiritual development?

Conclusion

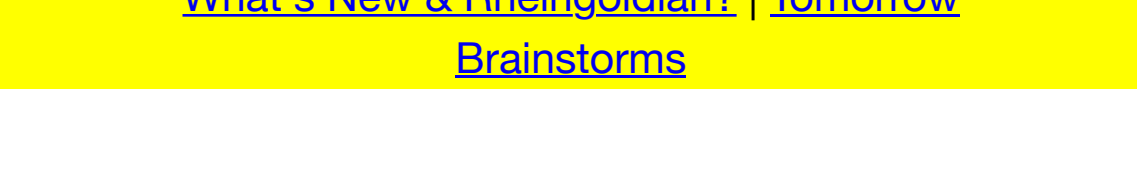
As saddened as CAE is to say it, the greater part of the net is capitalism as usual. It is a site for repressive order, for the financial business of capital, and for excessive consumption. While a small part of the net may be used for humanistic purposes and to resist authoritarian structure, its overall function is anything but humanistic. In the same way that we would not consider an unregulated bohemian neighborhood to be representative of a city, we must also not assume that our own small free zone domains are representative of the digital empire. Nor can we trust our futures to the empty promises of a seducer that has no love in its heart.

END

Note from Howard Rheingold

Geert Lovink of Amsterdam forwarded this essay to me; he referred me to Steve Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble, who replied to my permission query:

" ...all of CAE's work is anti-copyright, meaning that it is always and permanently in the public domain. You may use any of CAE's materials in any way that you see fit. (For more, check [our website](#)) We do, however, appreciate being told how the work is being used. Thank you for informing us. The essay, _Utopian Promises, Net Realities_, was written for the particular context of a media festival. CAE's perception is that festivals have a tendency to become electronic love-ins, so we positioned ourselves in a manner that was a little more skewed toward negation than usual in order to generate more critical discourse. I don't know if you are familiar with our other writings or our art work, but I should tell you that CAE does see more political promise and affirming qualities to the net than this particular paper might indicate. Enjoy. Steve/CAE"



Last modified: November 14, 1995.

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